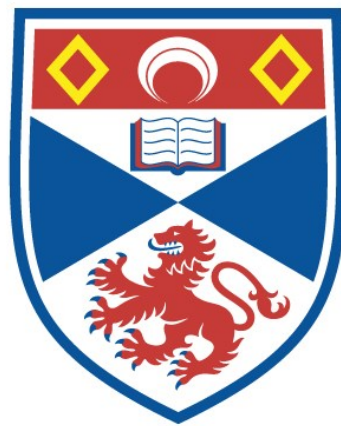


THE CONTEXTUAL *COGNITIO DEI*  
IN THE THEOLOGIES OF  
KARL BARTH AND CHOAN-SENG SONG

Li-Jen Ou

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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**THE CONTEXTUAL *COGNITIO DEI*  
IN THE THEOLOGIES OF  
KARL BARTH AND CHOAN-SENG SONG**

**Being a Thesis Presented by  
LI-JEN OU  
In the University of St Andrews  
In application for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**St Mary's College  
May, 1999**

## ABSTRACT

The major tasks of the present thesis are twofold: First, to show through a historical and material reconsideration of Karl Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God, the falsity of three prevalent misreadings of his work—that Barth denies God's capacity for making Himself known through nature, that he finally makes a concession to natural theology, and that Barth's theology as a whole is *acontextual* and takes little account of earthly conditions. Second, to consider the significance of Barth's actual teaching for the Taiwanese context by hosting a dialogue between his thought and the so-called 'Asian theology', with particular emphasis on the theology of the Taiwanese theologian Choan-Seng Song.

Firstly, the thesis argues that in regarding natural theology as a form of pernicious teaching, which declares that human beings as such possess the capacity and power to conceive God, the world and humanity, Barth wishes to safeguard against Christ's universal *sovereignty* in freedom being trivialised. Secondly, it accentuates that Barth's preference for revealed knowledge of God is meant to disclose the universal *love* in and of Christ which renews corrupted humanity in the act of reconciliation. While Barth has no doubt that this love penetrates into human culture and nature, making use of them as *media* in witness of God outside of the sphere of Christ and the Church, he never makes any concession to natural theology at the expense of Christ, i.e., of Christian faith. On balance, Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God is from beginning to end *Christocentric* in view of highlighting Christ as the centre.

Through a historical reading of Barth the thesis in turn seeks to establish a constructive dialogue between Barth and Song whose thought deeply

influences the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. It lays bare the hidden dangers of Asian theology and Song's *anthropocentric* knowledge in order to encourage Taiwanese Presbyterians to continue to consider an alternative approach (consonant with Barth's) to maintaining their Christian identity in a culture that is encompassed by a religiously pluralist atmosphere and a secular humanitarian ethos.



## DECLARATIONS

I, Li-Jen Ou, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 98,000 words in length, has been written by me, that is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date.                      Signature of Candidate..

I was admitted as an M.Phil. student in September 1995 and was transferred to the Ph.D. programme in May 1996, and as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in April, 1999; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1995 and 1999.

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I hereby certify the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **I. Motives for Research**

Like other churches in Asia, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (the first Protestant Church in Taiwan, to which the present writer belongs) has been a leading Christian church, both in social justice and peacemaking, since it was established in 1865. The Presbyterians endeavour to be ‘like salt and light’, to bear witness to God’s love in the Taiwanese society, which is encompassed by a religiously pluralist atmosphere, mainly Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the folk religion, which is a mixture of the three former, and a secular humanitarian ethos. However, having been wandering in such a pluralist and humanitarian jungle, Presbyterians in Taiwan themselves are becoming more and more unclear about their own Christian identity in seeking to coexist and co-operate with people of different religions and ideologies on socio-political issues. Hence, many are eager to pursue a ‘new’ theology, one which is expected to be vigorously independent of the Western tradition and thus more suitable for the Taiwanese context, on the basis of which coexistence and co-operation with others without sacrificing Christian identity will prove to be possible.

Under this circumstance, many are enthusiastically embracing sundry kinds of contextual theologies that have been widely advocated and welcomed in Asia since the 1970s. Among these, they have become particularly inspired by the books of the Taiwanese Presbyterian theologian Choan-Seng Song. Song has been pursuing an Asian theology to ‘reconstruct’ the Christian mission in

Asia.<sup>1</sup> He is considered the most prolific writer and ‘one of the most influential theologians of Asia’,<sup>2</sup> whose publications are ‘mostly widely read in the West’.<sup>3</sup> He was also newly elected the chairperson of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at its twenty-third General Assembly held in Hungary 1997, the first Asian to be elected to the chair. Himself strongly influenced by the Enlightenment’s scepticism, Song’s theology calls into question the value of the established Christian traditions. The Christian traditions, traditional understandings of the faith, and by and large Western theology, are treated as by-products of Western superiority, to be jettisoned by Christians in the rest of the world. The result of Presbyterian enthusiasm for Song’s work is that Christian identity, far from being revived, is now more vulnerable than ever in Taiwan, specifically in the sense that other religions are increasingly being accepted as equally valid sources of God’s truth, and secular humanism treated as an equally valuable tool for social reformation. The reason is simple--what Presbyterians in Taiwan, Asia, encounter in their special context does not actually accord at all with what Song has advocated in his books composed on the west coast of the United States of America.

This thesis is principally interested in Barth for two reasons. Firstly, because Song is especially critical of Barth, whom he regards as representative of ‘the West’, and he has on numerous occasions contended that Barth has nothing to offer to Taiwanese Christians or to any other Asian Christians,

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<sup>1</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction--An Asian Attempt* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> George Gispert-Sauch, ‘Asian Theology’ in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 470.

<sup>3</sup> Steven G. Mackie, ‘God’s People in Asia: A Key Concept in Asian Theology,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 42.2 (1989), 236.



whereas the present writer (himself Taiwanese) has realised the reverse is the case. The realisation is that Barth's theology was actually directed by a deep concern for the discernment of Christian identity and its disentanglement from culture within his own personal and politico-cultural set of circumstances in 1930s Germany. Secondly, therefore, the thesis wishes to argue that even though it would be inadequate simply to transplant Barth's teachings and thoughts into the Taiwanese context, and the Asian context at large, his theology ought nonetheless to be highly relevant to that context. It will encourage Taiwanese Christians to do theology afresh for their own time and place in the way Barth sought to do it for his. It is hoped, in this thesis, that through offering a fresh reading of Barth, with particular reference to his doctrine of knowledge of God, a constructive dialogue between the theologies of Barth and Song may be presented to the benefit of all Taiwanese, and even Asian, Christians who are concerned with retaining their Christian identity and bearing witness to God in their motherland.

## **II. Motifs of the Thesis**

Against the Hegelian stream of the nineteenth-century in the (*inter alia*) socio-political context during the two World Wars; and in spite of the positive dimension and potential contributions of the so-called 'general revelation' to Christian knowledge of God in the history of the Reformed tradition; Barth firmly rejected the Hegelian dichotomy, generalisation, and relativisation of the divine revelation solely in and through Christ. He then reconstructed his own

doctrine of the *cognitio Dei*, completely centred and based on Jesus Christ, after the Second World War. Since the first edition of his commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* was published in 1919, ‘the first-fruit’ of the “break” with “liberalism”,<sup>4</sup> Barth regarded natural theology as a form of pernicious teaching which declares that humanity as such, by nature and not by grace, possesses the capacity and power to conceive God, the world and the human person, which relativises Christ’s universal *sovereignty*. For Barth, while natural theology resembles the theology of revelation, to the extent that it speaks about God in the world, it deviates from the latter in deriving its criteria of conceiving God from conceptual deduction or induction. Hence, it is ‘attempting to see where God is at work independently of Christ’, ignoring the “underside of history” which the crucified Christ represents.’<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in Barth’s eyes, it is impossible for natural theology to speak about God without at the same time violating God’s *transcendence and His gracious relationship with human beings* through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.

One theologian points out that at the time of revising the first edition of *Romans* Barth was convinced that a true theological response to the contemporary context ‘would have to avoid all attempts at synthetic compromise with the distortions of the culture.’<sup>6</sup> Barth hoped that by establishing a genuine *antithesis* between Christian beliefs and the presuppositions of the culture they could avoid the easy synthesis that linked German Christianity, after

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce L. McCormack’s significant study, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995; paperback edition by the same publisher, 1997), ix.

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Gorringer, *Discerning Spirit: A Theology of Revelation* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 18.

Schleiermacher, to German nationalism and militarism.<sup>7</sup> Regarding himself as ‘an avowed opponent of all natural theology,’<sup>8</sup> Barth committed himself to an endless argument with it on the ground that God reveals Himself in His Word, which alone is human beings’ way leading to God, and knowledge of Him is a matter of miracle and grace. He chose to start to embody his theology by being in solidarity with the coeval Christians of pre-war and wartime Germany, and post-war Europe. Both in word and in deed, Barth has made a good example that in the light of their faith and traditions Christians, negatively, will be able to keep hold of the identity and, positively, to bear witness to the Word and participate in social renovation in time of political, cultural crises, and religious dialogue. As a Taiwanese Christian facing the two common denominators of Asian countries--dictatorship (in the forms of politics or economy) and religious pluralism--the present writer has no doubt that Barth’s theology, especially his understanding of the knowledge of God, is enormously relevant to the Taiwanese context, and that all Asian Christians will be inspired to appreciate their heritage more and empowered to bear witness to God in any case.

Through a *diachronic* and *material* reconsideration of Barth’s doctrine of the knowledge of God the present thesis will argue that three propositions are equally *parti pris* misleading. These are that Barth either finally makes a concession to or softens his negative attitude towards natural theology (such as, Emil Brunner, Ray Anderson, Hans Küng, Peter Harrison, and Choan-Seng Song); that he denies God’s capacity for making Himself known through nature; that Barth’s theology is *acontextual* or *acultural* and takes insufficient account of

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<sup>7</sup> Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation*, trans. J. L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 6.

this-worldly circumstances (Song, Kosuke Koyama, and other Asian theologians). As a matter of fact, Barth's repudiation of natural theology and acceptance of human words outside of the Bible should be seen in its *inter alia* historical context as his penultimate '*opus alienum*' in view of the ultimate '*opus proprium*' in order to highlight Jesus Christ as the centre of the knowledge of God. This is particularly significant because, negatively, it rules out the allegation as to Barth's contempt for Asian cultures which are all non-Christian in nature, and, positively, it fortifies the fact that Christians can persist in their identity in witness to God in time of suffering and within a pluralist culture which is hostile to Christianity.

Therefore, it is also hoped that the diachronic approach to Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God will draw the attention of some Asian theologians, especially that of the Taiwanese theologian Choan-Seng Song, to their bias that Barth's theology is by and large *a-contextual* is unjust, and that it will shed a light on the hidden danger of their cultural *anthropocentric* knowledge of God in the light of Barth's *Christocentric*. In so doing, the present writer realises that it is indispensable to invest considerable efforts in making sense of Barth. Alarming, this simplest prerequisite of appreciating Barth has been neglected by most of the Asian theologians who severely criticise Barth's theology as 'classroom' or 'lifeless' theology.<sup>9</sup> Hence, a slightly greater portion of the present thesis will be devoted to Barth in order to unearth what Barth has actually said as to how humans can conceive God within the *ad hoc* temporal and spatial settings, in contrast to Song, in the next chapters.

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<sup>9</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 37.

To further this reconsideration, Chapter One, ‘Karl Barth’s Repudiation of Natural Theology’, examines, in the first section, the incentive for Barth’s rejection of natural knowledge of God in its different forms, pursued by liberal Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Brunner, by entering into the remote and the immediate historical causes. The remote cause traces Barth’s dissociation from nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism during the first World War as the impetus of his post-war confrontation with liberal Protestantism and Catholicism, whereas the immediate cause retrospects Barth’s debate with Brunner over nature and grace to the rise of the German-Christians and the Nazis in the second World War. The confrontation and debate will be discussed in the second and third sections respectively.

Chapter Two, ‘Christ as the Centre of the Knowledge of God’, points out that, after refuting natural knowledge of God, Barth puts forth an alternative *terminus a quo* for both Christian and human speaking about God, viz., the revelation of God in *Jesus Christ*, and contends that He is *the* only one *terminus a quo* and nothing else is. In so doing, Barth intends to underscore the role that Jesus Christ plays in the revelation of God with a view to rectifying two alternative *idées fixe* about Barth: either accusing Barth’s Christocentric knowledge of God of restricting God’s revelation within the person of Christ and from nature, or ridiculing Barth for having compromised with natural theology when he speaks of ‘the Light of Life’, relative to the ‘secular parables’ of the kingdom of God, and the relationship between the ‘true Light’ and the ‘little lights of creation’ in the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*.

In this chapter we will see that Barth undertakes a defensive task in his doctrine of reconciliation, mainly in response to those misreadings. It argues

that, in the reconciling enterprise of the universal Lord Jesus Christ, fallen humanity was cast aside and a completely new humanity has been endowed. In reconciliation human beings, along with the creation, are not at the mercy of the waxing and waning of the *ira Dei*, but are by and large the *theatrum gloriae Dei* in the *iustitia Dei* in witness to His kingdom and His Word. This chapter concludes that while Jesus Christ is from first to last the axis of Barth's knowledge of God Barth has never denied God's capacity for making Himself known in nature; it is human beings who are responsible for their inability to conceive God outside the sphere of the threefold Word. As a matter of fact, in his early thought Barth insists that in the *ira Dei* the sovereignty of Christ triumphs over any worldly (natural) knowledge God and later he begins to contend that in the *iustitia Dei* the gracious love of Christ reconciles the world to God. Frankly speaking, Barth's doctrine of knowledge of God is a *cognitio Dei sub specie Christi* in the *Aufhebung* of the *ira Dei* and the *iustitia Dei*. That is to say, Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God must be understood in the light of Jesus Christ who determines it in so far as He is not only the epistemological but also the ontological ground of God's relation to human beings.

As its title denotes, Chapter Three, 'The Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of the Knowledge of God', intensifies what has been argued in the preceding chapter. The first section, 'the Ontological Foundation', claims that human beings are able to talk about God insofar as '*Deus dixit*'--God makes Himself known by speaking the Word to them in revelation on God's own initiative. Those who hear the Word of God in obedience are equipped with faith to conceive and bear witness to God *a posteriori*. Barth expands it by

exemplifying Anselm's dictum, 'God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived' in *Proslogion*. This is not the conventionalised idea--'ontological proof' by dint of human intellectuality *a priori*, but is actually a *Nachdenken* of the revelation of God that Barth terms '*fides quaerens intellectum*'. This chapter takes into consideration Barth's concepts of the '*Deus dixit*' and '*fides quaerens intellectum*', and suggests that the latter is the primordial method that determines Barth's theology.

The second section, 'the Epistemological Foundation', not only attempts to demonstrate firstly that the revelation of God is *Trinitarian* in essence, in which God assumes the threefold but single lordship as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, but also analyses the *content* and the *form* of the revelation so as to see how it is at work and received by the human. The content concerns Jesus Christ the *what* of the revelation: in revelation God, the divine *who*, becomes a fleshly and touchable person, Jesus of Nazareth, in history, as the objective reality and possibility of Christian knowledge of God. The form concerns its subjective reality and possibility, the Holy Spirit as the *how*, by which the content of the Incarnation happened historically is to be received by present-day individuals and communities. The discussions of the content and form of the Trinitarian revelation in turn, and inevitably, draw our attention to the mystery of the harmonious unity of God's being and act. On this basis the Christian is able to reach the conclusion with thankful astonishment that the being of God can only be conceived in His act and the act conceived in His being.

Chapter Four, 'The Knowledge of God in the Theology of Choan-Seng Song', scrutinises one of the most influential of the Asian theologians who intensely criticise Barth's theological efforts as *acontextual*, paying little

attention to this-worldly reality. In pursuing his theology, Song is eager to correlate religious life to earthly life in the Asian context, and to do so deliberately without reference to traditional or tradition-like Christian theology developed in the West and imported to Asia. The first section of this chapter looks at the background, i.e., Asian theology, out of which Song's theology arises. It enters into the genesis and nature of Asian theology, according to the Asian politico-economic and religious context. Then, it explores the primary tasks of Asian theology. These are to know, on the one hand, how to identify the Gospel and the unique identity of Jesus Christ from South East Asian cultural legacy so as to be liberated from both past and present historical experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism by the West, racial conflicts and economic poverty. On the other, they are to know how to commence conversation and *rapprochement* between Christianity and other religions without agreeing syncretism.

The final point of the first section takes into consideration the foremost idea of Asian theology--the principle of 'contextualisation'. The original meaning of 'contextualisation' is evangelical; it is concerned profoundly with the Gospel based on the *text* of Scripture in relation to the transformation of social *context*, and its process will always be *from text to context*, and not *vice versa*. However, radical Asian theologians, such as Song and others, deny the view that the revelation of God is inscriptured in the Bible and argue that not only theology, but also Scripture itself, is culturally and historically conditioned, hence, the biblical message must be relative and situational. They contend that the proper exegesis of Scripture depends solely upon the prophetic discernment of the human context; for them the most adequate hermeneutic procedure thus is from



context to text. The ways of interpreting the Bible and doing theology, as a result, are in peril of truncating and secularising of the Gospel. In reflecting on the methods and content of Asian theology, Song has become entirely convinced that theology is culturally conditioned and contextually determined. It is based on such prejudice that Song develops his theology.

In the second section, the three main theological methodologies located in Song will be examined. They are third-eye theology, theology of transposition and theology of story. In brief, third-eye theology encourages Asian Christians to do Christian theology in a Buddhist way. That is to say, 'to do theology with a third eye' and to approach 'the Reality beyond all realities' by *satori* (intuition). In theology of transposition Song insists that in order to fully and effectively *transpose* the Gospel to the Asian world, the roadblock which hinders the theological traffic must be removed. By roadblock Song means the biblical centrism on the whole idea of salvation history having to begin with Israel, and by way of Christianity. Theology of story disregards the Bible as the primary text for Christian theology, and resorts to Asian indigenous stories, folk tales and fairy legends.

The third section deals with Song's theological content, in connection with the knowledge of God, approximately after the manner of Barth in the foregoing chapters with slight difference, in accordance with the Asian context: Jesusology, Pneumatology, knowledge of God and Song's attitude towards Christian mission. By and large, the argument is put as follows: Jesus is merely an iconoclast and hero with prophetic insights and power by the Spirit who inspires and liberates those who are religiously and politically oppressed in the past and present. In the process of inspiration and liberation this Jesus actually has unveiled the God

of suffering, with His own people to the world, and knowledge of God can be obtained by anyone who suffers without this Jesus thereafter. Therefore, Christian mission and evangelism to bear witness to God to the world become unnecessary. In the course of the examination of Song's theology it is not surprising if one is aware that, being out of harmony with Barth, Song identifies theology with anthropology as do Catholicism and Liberal Protestantism, which creates destructive problems to the faith of Asian Christians.

The essentials of these discussions of Song and Barth will be extended to Chapter Five, 'Barth and Song on Religion', where their concepts of religion will be critically probed and compared. The critical comparison is not because the phenomenon of human religion mostly resembles the knowledge of God in revelation, but also because the problem of religious pluralism is one of the two utmost thorny issues (they will have already been mentioned in the fourth chapter) that agonise Asian Christians. In this chapter the reader will see Barth underscores the subjective reality and possibility of divine revelation. For him, revelation (as God's act encountering human beings, as an event through the Holy Spirit) resembles the human phenomenon of religion--'the realm of man's attempts to justify and sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God'<sup>10</sup>--and, therefore, must be differentiated. In so doing, Barth's application of the Hegelian terminology *Aufhebung* will be examined at length in the first section as a key to the dialectic relationship of revelation to human religion. By *Aufhebung* Barth means that God's revelation has put human religion, not exclusive of Christian religion, into crisis, in which individuals must

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, latest impression (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 280.

make their own choices between the revelatory knowledge of God, the true religion, and human religious cogitation of the Absolute. These also lead to a necessary clarification of the equivocal commonplace as to Barth's Christian-centred hostility towards other religions.

In section two, Barth and Song show extraordinary convergence in condemning 'false religion'. To Barth, false religion misleads its believers to the dead abyss of self-justification and self-sanctification by ignoring the saving *grace* of God, whereas, for Song, false religion misdirects its leaders to abuse people with authority in league with political power. In section three, these two theologians again reveal their divergence in the concept of true religion. In Barth's eye, true religion must be a religion of God's grace in Jesus Christ in which sinners are justified by the faith that accepts the fragility of Christianity and therein exhibits its genuine power, while, to Song, true religion is a hidden power in humanity that musters people in pursuit of social and political reformation for their common interests. Moreover, this section takes into consideration Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for his concept of religion has also considerably interested Asian Christians, especially when Barth is discussed.

Last but not least, Chapter Six, 'Criticisms of Barth and Song', offers an overall *critical* evaluation on both Barth and Song from an Asian Christian's point of view in spite of the contribution they have made. On the one hand, it argues that even though Barth's theological endeavour on revealed knowledge of God is enormous, to the extent that it strengthens the *what* of the Christian traditions (faith and identity) and protects them from secularisation on top of human domestication in the light of the threefold word of God, it is remiss in the importance of *how* the what can be accessible and the God conceivable outside

the Christian sphere. On the other hand, it affirms that whereas Song is admirable in the commitment to pondering over *how* to make Christianity more acceptable to the Asian world, he fails to do justice to the Christian heritage, so cherished by Barth, by trying to assimilate the essential *what* of Christianity into various Asian cultures and to mingle Christian theology with other religious traditions. It also points out that the anthropocentric knowledge of God in Song (and in Asian theology), as opposed to the Christocentric knowledge of God in Barth, leads to the fear of ‘people’ being trivialised in God’s salvation, thus looking forward to the renewal of fidelity to God, and is *de facto* another version of natural theology. It fails to address Barth’s questions and concerns, and therefore remains unduly optimistic about the general human ‘capacity’ for God, puts at risk the Christian identity, whose consequential failure in this regard has been anticipated in Barth’s teaching about the reconstructed *cognitio Dei*. The chapter also suggests that the integration between Barth and Song is realisable if, prior to determining *how* to do it, Song together with Asian Christians, including the present writer himself, pays more attention to *what* Barth had to say in his doctrine of the knowledge of God as well as to *what* he had done in times of faith crisis. They will learn much and gain new hope through a process of attentive seeking and listening to God’s own Word spoken in tune with context in the Christocentred manner that Barth advocated.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**THE BACKGROUND TO KARL BARTH'S REPUDIATION OF**  
**NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD**

Karl Barth launches a serious attack against natural theology and the difference between *special* revelation in Christ *general* revelation in nature because he has no doubt the Bible itself does not contain, and is not interested in, arguments for the existence of God. Rather it insists that God has revealed Himself to His people by way of His Word. His divine Word abolishes our twisted knowledge of Himself and renovates a knowledge which would not be gained *secundum naturam*. Knowledge, for example, that the world was created by the word of God, is not inference based on observation but a truth known by faith. This view is solidly challenged by Brunner who believes that Barth has overstated his case, in a booklet entitled *Natur und Gnade (Nature and Grace)*.<sup>1</sup> This results in Barth's angry reply, *Nein (No)!* The public disagreement is subsequently known as the 'Barth-Brunner Debate'.

In preparation for examining the debate we shall now have to consider two principal causes of their debate: the remote cause which is Barth's dissociation from the nineteenth-century liberalism that inhibited his theological mentors in discerning German nationalist policies during the First World War; and the immediate cause which is the rise of the German-Christians and Nazism in 1933-1934. In addition, it is important to mention the significance of Barth's then theological *tour de force*: they are *Theological Existence Today!*<sup>2</sup> and the 'Barmen Theological Declaration', the latter of which was primarily drafted by

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Emil Brunner and the reply "No!" by Karl Barth, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: The Century Press, 1946).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Theological Existence Today!* trans. R. Birch Hoyle (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933).

Barth and has been regarded as the paramount token of the Confessing Church against the religious-political *leviathan*.

## **I. The Historical Background**

### *(I) The Remote Cause--Dissociation from Nineteenth-Century Liberalism*

Barth studied Christian theology in an atmosphere of liberal Protestantism, taught by the famous Adolf von Harnack at the University of Berlin and by Wilhelm Herrmann at Marburg.<sup>3</sup> At this time he became an enthusiastic student of Schleiermacher, who had been regarded as the harbinger of nineteenth-century Liberalism which consists of three primary characteristics.

First, it developed a suspicion of the traditional schemes of dogmatic theology, and an attempt to reconstruct Christian belief in a way which took into account historical criticism. This, for instance, could be illustrated by new procedures in such areas as Christology or the doctrine of the Church. Second, it made use of the knowledge of evolution, provided by developments in the biological sciences. Human history was seen in terms of evolutionary progress. By the use of reason and the intellectual tools at their disposal, human beings would be able to fashion a better future for themselves. Such biblical concepts as 'sin' ought to be translated to mean imperfection or ignorance; 'salvation' consequently ought to be thought of in terms of education and enlightenment, and 'the kingdom of God' ought similarly to be reinterpreted in terms of some kind of evolutionary progressivism. Finally, there was increasing use of the works of Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), who regarded

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<sup>3</sup> See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1976; also in paperback edition by Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 38-46.

Christianity as a ‘historical phenomenon to be subjected to critical examination’.<sup>4</sup> They considered human experience of a ‘predominantly moral nature’ as a source for theology and the essence of the religious sentiment to be the feeling of absolute dependence; and interpreted Christ as the supreme example of such dependence and ‘God-consciousness’.<sup>5</sup>

These scientific impacts from outside of the realm of the Holy Scripture upon the Christian church at the time undermined the status of the Bible as authoritative Scripture. As a consequence of literary and historical study, it was no longer possible to hold that biblical literature was all of one kind, and all on the same level of authority or ‘inspiration’. To take the Bible as an infallible oracle, to believe that in it the Word of God was inspired from above, was now seen to violate the nature of the biblical literature as such and to presuppose that the divine method of revelation is one which imposes rather than elicits, *explains* rather than indicates, and forces rather than persuades.<sup>6</sup>

This created the background against which Barth’s early theological thinking developed. However, Barth was profoundly shocked by the statement published in 1914 by university teachers in Germany endorsing German war policy. To his astonishment he saw in the list of signatories to this document some of his former theological teachers.<sup>7</sup> The shock to him was the inability of these teachers to see that any gap existed between the values which they

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), 83f.

<sup>6</sup> See E. J. Tinsley ed., *Modern Theology: Selections from Twentieth-Century Theologians* (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 13-38.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 81.

professed to believe and German nationalist policies during the 1914-1918 war.<sup>8</sup> It marked the beginning of Barth's distrust of nineteenth-century liberal theology. His theology, therefore, started as a strong reaction against the liberal theology of the nineteenth-century in general and that of Schleiermacher in particular, specially its alliance with philosophies which he believed prevented the unique and distinctive features of the Christian religion from being clearly expressed. Barth views 'with mistrust both Schleiermacher and all that Protestant theology essentially became under his influence'.<sup>9</sup>

Barth moved on to place a new kind of emphasis on the Bible, which he regarded as providing the categories for Christian theology through its witness to the unique divine revelation in Christ and the place of scripture in the formation of dogmatic theology. There is also in Barth a new emphasis on the indissoluble links between theology and the Church. The Church as the believing community came to have a new meaning for Barth as the body which finds itself bearing the Word of God and being judged by it. He realised that the values of the nineteenth-century liberalism, as held by academics and intellectuals of his day, left them incapable of recognising tyranny when it appeared, much less of standing up against it. Academic education, even in theology, did not make human beings any more able or likely to perceive the vicious liberalism and aggression implicit in the German policies which led to the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war. Certainly nothing could be more contrary to the theological method of the nineteenth-century liberalism than what was promulgated by Barth. For him, theology (dogmatics) begins not with a series

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<sup>8</sup> Helmut Gollwitzer, *Selections from Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, xv-xvi.



of questionings about human existence or the universe but with a reflection on the Word of God. This Word first confronted human beings as a divine answer in the form of a revelation to which a unique witness is borne by the Holy Scripture sermonised and heard in Christian preaching.<sup>10</sup>

The *remote cause*, Barth's dissociation from nineteenth-century liberalism, in a certain sense foreshadowed his unreserved attack on natural theology and the consequent debate with Brunner over natural theology in 1933, with a view to opposing Nazism and the German-Christians. Nevertheless, not till the *immediate cause*, the emergence of Nazism and the German-Christians, has also been taken into account, can Barth's *casus belli* against natural theology and against Brunner be properly understood. We shall now move forward to the beginning of the early 1930s' German 'Church Struggle' under the heel of National Socialist rule.

## (II) *The Immediate Cause--The Rise of the 'German-Christians' and Nazism*

The same inability of the liberal mind of German Protestantism to believe in the resistant and anti-rational possibilities of human conduct displayed itself again when the Nazis came to power in 1933. It 'plunged the German Evangelical Church into crisis. The church, like all other institutions, was to be "co-ordinated" and domesticated to the doctrines of National Socialism with its trinity of nationalism, racism and militarism.'<sup>11</sup> In fact the crisis in German Protestantism began as early as the collapse of the Kaiser's Reich. The November Revolution of 1918 and its consequences not only meant the end of

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<sup>10</sup> See Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Green ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom, The Making of Modern Theology* (London: Collins Publications, 1989), 148.

German traditional legal order (church government by the local ruler) which bound the Protestant churches very closely to their respective territories by the supreme episcopate; but the revolution also took away its political support, and endangered its economic foundations; which was no less than a catastrophe. Fortunately the churches were in a favourable situation in 1919 in that in the Weimar constitution it was possible to guarantee the legal and economic position of the church in a way which could hardly have been believed possible in the turbulence of the revolution.<sup>12</sup>

However, in terms of Christian faith, this apparently solved only the church's *external* political and economic crisis, rather than its *internal* spiritual and theological crisis. That was the case, on the one hand, for the critical theological movement of Barth who in association with others bitterly attacked the ignorant sense of satisfaction in the church. On the other hand, it was also the case, for the wider movement of German nationalistic Protestantism which, deeply discontented with the state of politics and the church in Germany, hoped for a national renewal of Lutheranism and a Lutheran renewal of the nation--a hope which was accompanied by a powerful action of anti-Catholicism, which was a precondition for the rise of the German-Christians.<sup>13</sup>

The breadth and depth to which these nationalistic Protestant ideas were still widespread in German Protestantism emerged with surprising distinctiveness after Hitler's accession to power. In spring and summer 1933 the German-Christian promotes fiercely the idea of the political trinity of *Reich, Volk,*

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<sup>12</sup> With regard to this issue, *vide* Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Vol. 1, *Preliminary History and Time of Illusions 1918-1934*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1987), 21-36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-236.

*Führer*.<sup>14</sup> The new government with its nationalistic concentration provoked new expectations in German Protestantism; much of what had been repressed since 1918 now came to the surface again and allied itself with the enthusiastic hope for the renewal of Germany and the completion of the Reformation in the form of a national Lutheran Reich Church.<sup>15</sup> This expectation was epitomised by the young Protestant theoreticians of state-church law who assembled together to formulate a new Reich Church constitution and put it into practice in autumn and winter 1933/1934, during which time in September Hitler's personal representative, Ludwig Müller, was elected first Reich Bishop.<sup>16</sup>

While the German-Christians' victory seemed complete, however, a twofold resistance was now underway. Practically, the Pastors' Emergency League, with more than 7000 members formed in the vicinity of thirty-seven percent of all Protestant pastors in Germany, came into being as an alliance of pastors loyal to the confession in January 1934.<sup>17</sup> Theologically, four months later, in 31st May Barth, with Hans Asmussen, Thomas Breit and the first Reich Confessing Synod of Barmen, promulgated the celebrated 'Theological Declaration of Barmen',<sup>18</sup> the theological charter which became the rallying point of church resistance to Hitler as well as to the Nazi-sponsored 'German Christians'. The theological core and spirit of Barmen Declaration is identical with Barth's other significant pamphlet bearing the title *Theological Existence Today!* published in July 1933.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Vol. 2, *The Years of Disillusionment: 1934, Barmen and Rome*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1988), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 133ff.

It is doubtless the case that Barth's remarkable contributions to the Barmen Declaration provided a solid impetus to the formation of the 'Confessing Church' and opposed the growth of Nazism and the German Christian Movement. The crucial matter of the Confessing Church's conflict with the German-Christians, Barth believed, was 'not centred on the Lord's Supper', as was the Reformation of the sixteenth-century, 'but on the *first commandment*.'<sup>19</sup> 'To confess to Christ means not to confess to others than Christ' was the faith that Barth confessed and defended at the risk of his own life.

Through the observation of the remote and immediate causes with historical binoculars the background against which the Barth-Brunner controversy occurred is apparent. Nonetheless, anyone who wishes to understand how the Confessing Church proved able to oppose a church-political power (which seemed almost overwhelming) to prevent the flagitious co-ordination of church and state, and, in lieu of this, to make the church the independent guardian of the state, must not neglect the importance of the Barmen Declaration which was originally sketched out by Barth.

### (III) *The Significance of 'Theological Existence Today!' and the 'Barmen Theological Declaration'*

*Theological Existence Today!* was specially addressed to the German Protestant ministers and was one long plea to them 'in no circumstances' now to forfeit their theological existence for anything that was regarded as a good purpose. But what does this remarkable term mean?<sup>20</sup> Barth explains it very

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict*, trans. P. T. A. Parker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 27 [italics mine].

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *Theological Existence Today!* 17.

clearly: ‘Our existence as theologians is our life within the church, and, of course, as appointed preachers and teachers within the church.’<sup>21</sup> It also means, as he expands it later, ‘our attachment to God’s word and plying our calling particularly to the ministry of the Word’.<sup>22</sup> The peril of renouncing this theological reality may occur because human beings would ‘no longer appreciate the intensity and exclusiveness of the demand which the Divine Word makes as such when looking at the force of other demands; so that in our anxiety in the face of existing dangers we no longer put our whole trust in the authority of God’s word, but we think we ought to come to its aid with all sorts of contrivance.’<sup>23</sup> ‘That under the stormy assault of “principalities, powers, and rulers of this world’s darkness”, we seek for God elsewhere than in Jesus Christ and seek Christ elsewhere than in the Holy Scriptures.’<sup>24</sup> Anyone who forfeits his or her theological existence in this way, Barth thought, was no longer a preacher and teacher of the church, but a politician or a church politician. This was nothing to be ashamed of whereas ‘it is something else to be a theologian’.<sup>25</sup>

This introduction is followed by a devastating criticism of the German-Christians’ church-political schemes, but even more so of the schemes of their opponents, the church opposition. Here Barth accuses them, i.e. the so-called Young Reformers Movement, his friends, of just meddling in church politics, namely ‘tactics against tactics, tricks and counter-tricks, pronouncement against pronouncement’, and thus, like the church politics of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 11, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 14f.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 17.

German-Christians, of having ‘conceded a goodly portion of common politics’.<sup>26</sup> Instead, Barth exhorts the ministers, where necessary, i.e. where the enemy comes into view, to ‘repeat and affirm the church’s confession by word and deed’.<sup>27</sup> And he goes on: ‘Where the confession is, the one, holy church is there present in the fight with error in which she will never lose the day’.<sup>28</sup> But doubtlessly, there are always mistakes ‘where there is “movement”, and error and sectarianism are always at least close at hand. The Holy Spirit needs no “movements”; the devil has probably invented most of them’.<sup>29</sup>

What Barth argues here amounts to a complete change of the previous viewpoints. He argues that the nature of controversy about the essence of church is *theological* rather than *church-political* nor simply *political*. Thus, the confrontation must be faced and dealt with theologically--with the church confession in word and deed--and not church-politically or politically; if that happens it is irrevocably lost. In accordance with this assertion we can recognise the original and historical significance of the Barmen *Theological* Declaration and why it must be announced aloud. This was insofar as it stated fundamentally that the Confessing Church did *not* allow interference, with force, by any political themes--whether appropriate or inappropriate.

The basic position, which had already been found in *Theological Existence Today* and was repeated and developed in Barth’s second statement on theology and church, was not concerned with political issues of oppression and deprivation of rights, nor church-political efforts of co-ordination of church and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 78. Here Barth was evidently thinking about all of the ‘Faith Movement’ of the German-Christians and the Young Reformers Movement.

state. Hence, the Barmen Theological Declaration did not adopt a political standpoint to counter that of the German-Christians, but argued on a completely different level. It contended that the error of the German-Christians was in no way a political error but rather ‘the error of the papal church and the enthusiasts’: Thus the enemy was ‘no new enemy, but an old enemy in a new form’, namely the human claim that is always the same, the desire ‘by referring to one’s spirit, conscience and righteousness to be a second God alongside God’.<sup>30</sup> Barth confirms the specific importance of the Barmen Theological Declaration counter to natural theology later in his *Church Dogmatics* II/1: This text [of the Barmen Declaration] is ‘important and apposite because it represents the first confessional document in which the Evangelical Church has tackled the problem of *natural theology*,...especially in the form of the God-sent Adolf Hitler, which...took its place beside the revelation attested in Holy Scriptures’.<sup>31</sup>

Barth is deeply concerned here with the fact that, under the mask of natural theology, the *Führer*, the state or the superiority of the German nature and history...etc., can easily be idolised as a ‘new revelation’ (i.e. the so-called natural or general revelation) substituting for the *primary* and *special* revelation. In spite of the fact that it is a *Nachdenken*, the preceding affirmation of the significance of the Barmen Theological Declaration to Barth in the *Dogmatics* II/1 is extremely advantageous for us in understanding what Barth constantly had in mind, in controversy with Brunner over natural theology in 1934. That will be discussed *in extenso* later.

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<sup>30</sup> John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1982), 520.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1: *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight and J. L. M. Haire (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 172ff [italics mine]. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 86.

## II. The Abiding Challenge to Liberal Protestantism and Roman Catholicism

### (I) *The Challenge to Liberal Protestantism-- Human Culture in Subordination of the Gospel*

It has been briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that Barth embarked upon his theology in sharp reaction against liberal Protestantism, primarily associating with Schleiermacher on account of his disappointment in his former theological mentors in the specific socio-political atmosphere in Germany during the First World War. Since then Barth had been wary of being confronted extrinsically and politically with the artificial injustice that challenges humanity, and at the same time (and this is all the more thorny) intrinsically and theologically with the crux of liberal Protestantism that undermines Christian faith. The crux is the illusion that human beings on the strength of their own achievement, namely, culture or civilisation, are possessed of primacy over the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is on account of this illusion that Barth ruthlessly rejected Modern liberalism, and steadily insisted that 'liberal Christianity is *not* Christianity.'<sup>32</sup>

Barth realises that this is an enormous task, for the theology he has to impugn is entwined with the thoughts and trends of the most brilliant intellectual accomplishments of modern European culture. The difficulties of the task lead Barth, irrespective of his reluctance, to concede that the Christian leaders and thinkers of the nineteenth century must be held in high regard, Schleiermacher above all, for their stupendous contribution to modernity, and their will to keep the Gospel in tune with the vitality and power of contemporary culture

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<sup>32</sup> John McConnachie, *The Barthian Theology and the Man of To-day: A Theology Whose Dominant Note Is 'Christ Jesus Our Hope'* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), 36.



civilisation.<sup>33</sup> It is also irrefutable that they reached great success by their discretion, for they successfully elucidated Christianity as an essential part and *tour de force* of that culture, but in so doing, they bequeathed their posterity a Christianity which was merely a special pattern and offspring of the development of the human spirit.<sup>34</sup>

The measure of their intellectual achievements thus became also the measure of their deviation from the real Gospel. Barth contends that Schleiermacher by defining Christianity as necessary to the development of the human spirit renounced the propriety of theological function and indeed made it impossible. In other words, by making his own theological task subsidiary to the general and major task of human feeling, civilisation and culture, Schleiermacher failed to take theology seriously as a matter to be pursued for its own sake, as having a subject-matter rational and conceivable in itself and to be explored by virtue of human interior logic and necessity.<sup>35</sup>

Schleiermacher's skewed concept of Christianity, as a result, gave rise to an *anthropocentric*, rather than Christocentric, and a *culture-orientated* rather than gospel-orientated Christian theology. Christian doctrines or dogmatics which teach as well as confirm the biblical accounts of God's redemption of humans are 'presented as the correct expression of the Christian

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<sup>33</sup> See Barth's foreword to his lectures on Schleiermacher in *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, xiii. It is worthwhile referring to Richard R. Niebuhr, 'Christ, Nature, and Consciousness: Reflections on Schleiermacher in the Light of Barth's Early Criticism'; Hans W. Frei, 'Barth and Schleiermacher: Divergence and Convergence'; and Stephen W. Sykes, 'Schleiermacher and Barth on the Essence of Christianity--an Instructive Disagreement' in *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?* ed. James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 23-42; 65-107.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 245.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

self-consciousness'<sup>36</sup> in which redemption means no more than a psychological transition which 'enclosed both the consciousness of sin...and the consciousness of grace.'<sup>37</sup> In defending the orthodoxy of *real* theology for the good of Christian faith Barth rigorously reproaches Schleiermacher that, by downgrading God's loving work in the form of miracle to be 'an increasing knowledge and mastery of nature in the endless progress of civilisation', he elevates human culture at the expense of the Gospel and thus of the faith.<sup>38</sup>

In this sense, certainly, God's saving work in and through Jesus Christ the 'real miracle of God' is no longer 'supernatural and miraculous',<sup>39</sup> and the Gospel of Christ prophesied, proclaimed and confessed by faith in the Old and the New Testaments becomes at best a human 'liberated feeling of absolute dependence' or 'religious self-consciousness',<sup>40</sup> and at worst an inferior human invention which will sooner or later be unmasked in the course of civilisation. 'And if the feeling of absolute dependence is in and for itself a co-existence with God in the selfsame consciousness, then statements about the self-consciousness become also statements about God.'<sup>41</sup> In this regard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is absolutely right when he pinpoints the fact that the 'weakness of liberal theology was that it conceded to the world the right to determine Christ's place in the

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<sup>36</sup> Karl Barth, 'Schleiermacher' in Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louis Pettibone Smith, with an introduction (1962) by T. F. Torrance (London: SCM Press, 1962), 163.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 198-202, especially 200. Barth explains that 'the Christian consciousness in the narrower sense has a presupposition, the consciousness of dependence, or God-consciousness in general. We find this in ourselves (the first leap), in our self-consciousness (the second leap). This God-consciousness, then, is not merely presupposed but also contained in the Christian consciousness.'

<sup>41</sup> Barth, 'Schleiermacher', 164.

world; in the conflict between the church and the world dictated.’<sup>42</sup>

If Christ is only a human being, not God Himself after the manner of human existence, and if the Incarnation of the Word is only an objectified vision of human religious consciousness or inner feeling, then Christianity is merely an evanescent expression of human culture. This culture emerged out of the current of time and will be submerged again as the teleological process of civilisation that accelerates in its remarkable fulfilment. Furthermore, theology becomes only an ideological explanation for the constructions of the existence of human beings in history and self-understanding.<sup>43</sup> Barth is aware of the danger that by identifying human religious self-consciousness with the presence of God Schleiermacher was not so much defending the Christian faith as pursuing a mysticism to unify human beings with God. Inasmuch as faith in terms of a ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ is none other than ‘the satisfaction “of the continually renewed, daily need of the heart for receiving spiritual life.”’ It is an avoidance of being responsible for this-worldly affairs and of being removed by them; ‘an entrance into that deep inner stillness where (as we have heard) a union of man with God occurs and must continually recur. This union Schleiermacher himself, in distinction from orthodoxy and rational, called mysticism.’<sup>44</sup>

For fear of falling into such a pitfall Barth places emphasis upon an essential *diastasis* between God’s ways and human ways, God’s thinking and human thinking, between Christianity and humanism, Word of God and word of

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<sup>42</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge, trans. R. Fuller, enl. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1971), 327.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, ‘Schleiermacher’, 193.

humankind, and between the Gospel and human culture.<sup>45</sup> With Barth, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by Paul, penetrates into flaunted human culture, the so-called upwards evolution of human spirit, for the Gospel descends from God in Jesus Christ into the world as a judgement intervening in humankind's life, propelling it into crisis. It descends above all as grace, establishing humankind's existence on a utterly new ground, yet is thus most perturbingly and crucially important for all human achievements and so-called civilisation. Insofar as 'Jesus Christ is the one Word of God become flesh, the very Son of God come into our human existence in space and time, for us and for our salvation, then as the one Truth of God he is the centre of all truth and the creative source of all that is good and beautiful and true, and of all true culture.'<sup>46</sup>

The relation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to human culture and civilisation that Barth has derived from Schleiermacher is one of the central issues with which Barth has been tussling all through his theological career with the view of breaking through the cadre of modern culture into whole theological freedom and seeking for a new foundation and starting point for Christian faith.

## (II) *The Challenge to Roman Catholicism*

In late October 1925 Barth ended his professoriate of theology in Göttingen and was appointed as Professor of Dogmatics and New Testament

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. from the sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, fifth impression (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 45.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 209.

Exegesis at the University of Münster.<sup>47</sup> For Barth this did not only mean a shift of time and space but also a shift of his partner in theological dialogue from Protestant to Catholic. In the eyes of theology, Münster, a Catholic-dominated city, has been diametrically different from Göttingen, a rampart of Lutheranism.<sup>48</sup> Since his teaching activities in Münster, Barth had realised that the most drastic distinction between the Protestant Church and the Roman Catholic Church is nothing but one concept--*the nature of grace*.<sup>49</sup>

Barth recognised that Roman Catholic natural theology and its doctrine of the *analogia entis* is grounded on the concept that divine grace can be obtained through and by the nature of the Church, human beings and anything else apart from Christ. This recognition was the starting point for Barth's severe critique of Roman Catholicism, and accordingly results in Barth's strong emphasis on grace against nature and on the *analogia fidei* as the alternative to *analogia entis* by means of the Hegelian pattern of his dialectical theology.<sup>50</sup>

### **1. Nature as human impotency against grace**

The Roman Catholic Church begins its faith with natural theological demonstration of 'the existence of God' on the basis that there is little point in discussing any further what is not in being. As Barth notices, Roman Catholicism 'grounds the possibility of our knowledge of God in that *similitudo Dei* which is ours (and the world's) by virtue of our (and its) createdness. On

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<sup>47</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 375.

<sup>48</sup> For the reason why Barth began to consider Roman Catholicism his main opponent see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 375-391.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 379-380.

<sup>50</sup> See George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Sharp of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 85-86; 98. He points out that the Hegelian pattern, along with the Chalcedonian and the Trinitarian pattern, is one of the three larger formal patterns in the *Church Dogmatics*, in which the relationship between revelation and religion; nature and grace become affirmed, cancelled, and then reconstituted on a higher level. It is 'a pattern whose underlying metaphor would seem to be "incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection."'

the basis of this analogy, knowledge can be simply “read off of the given”.<sup>51</sup> However, Barth moves on, ‘a God whose being is understood in this way becomes indistinguishable from a hidden feature of the world. The great danger...is that God becomes indistinguishable from fate: *Deus sive natura*. And the *Deus sive natura* is not the God who reveals Himself in His Word.’<sup>52</sup>

Barth, however, constitutes a different knowledge of God that directly challenges to Roman Catholicism’s primary concern.. He, in any event, rejects beginning by constructing the existence of God, i.e. natural theology, in *Church Dogmatics* (or any other earlier works) in that it is considered unbelief.<sup>53</sup>

Barth speaks here of a *dilemma* that confronts natural theologians. In presenting a piece of natural theology, the believers must either adopt what Barth calls ‘the standpoint of unbelief’, or they must pretend to their unbelieving interlocutor to do so.<sup>54</sup> If they do the former, they desert their Christian standpoint; but if they do the latter, they are dishonest, in wicked faith professing to believe what fundamentally they do not believe. But what is the standpoint of unbelief and what is it to adopt it? And how could one arrive at this standpoint just by working at natural theology, just by making a serious attempt to prove the existence of God?<sup>55</sup>

For Barth, in *arguing* about the existence of God, in attempting to prove it, one implicitly adopts a certain stance. In adopting this stance one presupposes that it is not yet known whether there is a God; this remains to be seen, and is up

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<sup>51</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 386.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 93-95.

<sup>54</sup> Alvin Plantinga, ‘The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,’ in *Rational in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrik Hart (Boston: University Press of America, 1983), 368.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Cf. John Gerco’s response to Plantinga in ‘Catholics vs. Calvinists on Religious Knowledge,’ *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, LXXI (1997), 13-34.

for discussion.<sup>56</sup> In adopting this stance, furthermore, natural theologians implicitly concede that what one ought to believe here depends on the result of the enquiry. If there are good arguments *for* the existence of God, then we (the believers and unbelievers who are together engaged in this enquiry) ought to accept God's existence. If there are good arguments *against* the existence of God, we ought to accept its denial. And if the arguments on both sides are equally strong, or equally weak, then perhaps the right thing to do is to remain agnostic. Each one of these attitudes is regarded as unacceptable and blasphemous.<sup>57</sup>

According to T. H. L. Parker, Barth argues that God offers and provides for human beings *the knowledge of Himself* by revealing Himself in Jesus Christ, rather than in nature.<sup>58</sup> Barth also stresses that God reveals His very existence and very nature exclusively in Jesus Christ. In no way, therefore, can human beings acquire *the true knowledge of God* outside of the divine revelation.<sup>59</sup> Insofar as God 'exists objectively and independently'. *He is who He is*. In the person of Jesus Christ, God reveals not *something about Himself*, but the one He actually is.<sup>60</sup> In sum, as Parker describes, natural theology is regarded as guilty by Barth by insisting that human beings 'can know that God exists without at the same time knowing Him or His attributes, as if the being of God were an entity separate from His nature. Or it will say that the human can know God as the Creator or the Judge, as if God were at one time Creator, at another Judge, at

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 387.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> T. H. L. Parker, 'Barth on Revelation', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 13.4(1960): 380.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 381.

another Redeemer'.<sup>61</sup>

As a result of the above arbitrary the unity and integrity of God are neglected. Hence, even an infinitesimal endeavour on human part to construct a basis on which the existence of God is built independent of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is to endanger the Christian faith. For God solely reveals His authentic existence and nature in His encounter *vis-à-vis* humanity in Jesus Christ.<sup>62</sup> Barth believes that, pursuant to 'evangelical faith', one must begin distinctly with the reality of the knowledge of God, in the light of the self-revelation of God on which Christian dogmatics is based, rather than with its mere possibility of proving an unknown divine being. The existence of God to Christians is an undeniable objective truth already proclaimed in Holy Scriptures, which is utterly independent of human intelligence and needs not to be proved, but rather, confessed by faith.<sup>63</sup>

In accordance with natural theology, as Barth understands it, a coherent human knowledge of God can by human intellectual exercise be reasoned out without recourse to the objective revelation of God--Jesus Christ. The concept of an 'immediate, natural, and general' approach to God, i.e. human effort in search of divine being, in terms of intellectual exercise or arguments rather than the special revelation of Christ in the Gospel, is regarded as a wretched human endeavour to maintain and assert themselves in self-conceit. Having invented natural theology human beings, under illusions of 'self-sufficiency and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 36ff; see also Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 202ff. The problem of 'dogmatic prolegomena' will be further discussed in the next chapter.



self-justification'<sup>64</sup>, behave as if they themselves had already been possessed of the key to a palatium, through which God was bound to be conceived. Moreover, they imagine themselves as versatile masters of their own destiny taking no account of the guidance of God's Word, unaware of their being *en route* to the valley of guilt and death from which they can only be saved by divine grace.<sup>65</sup>

Barth's criticism is that natural theology, in beginning by contending for human natural capacities and ending by rejecting the miracle of grace, disparages the fact that the human capacity for grace is exclusively mediated in Jesus Christ. 'It is a rampart in our defence against the miracle of grace.'<sup>66</sup> Inasmuch as the content of this miracle is grace, human beings can firmly believe that God was, is and will constantly be helping human beings in their deepest need with a salvational and free grace to carry them through the village of guilt and death, but merely on condition that they surrender their self-sufficiency tagged by natural theology. This surrender, nevertheless, is frankly what natural theology would not allow. That is to say, for Barth, natural theology 'is no more and no less than the unavoidable theological expression for the grace of God and therefore a readiness for the knowability of God in His revelation is not at all.'<sup>67</sup>

Natural theology assumes that human beings have some sort of independent and autonomous leverage in relation to divine grace. It is such a theology that permits humankind to transform revelation from a 'question into an answer' that is already given by themselves. It permits humankind to 'absorb

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 135-136.

<sup>66</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 97.

<sup>67</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 135.

and domesticate grace' rather than be ousted by it.<sup>68</sup> Revelation, as a result, is conquered at the very outset and downgraded to 'non-revelation' at the end.<sup>69</sup> Humankind suppose that they can turn revelation into a possibility to be chosen by themselves without sacrificing their own rationality. Human rationality, '(very far from being sacrificed) has at once undergone an immense inner enrichment, an addition, so to speak, to its furniture'.<sup>70</sup> Such a theological presupposition which supposes that grace exists *alongside* nature, has arbitrarily reduced the *precious* divine grace to *cheap* grace on sale in the display window of natural theology. This is because natural theology supposes that by nature, not by grace in the power of the Holy Spirit and thus in faith, human beings are somehow capable of co-operating with God. 'It supposes that nature has its own quotient of sovereignty and freedom apart from that established and sustained by grace itself.'<sup>71</sup> Barth rejects these *natural* presuppositions as being 'incontrovertibly impossible'.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, 'revelation (without mediation) and grace (without miracle) become possibilities (without uniqueness)' that human beings can choose at their disposal.<sup>73</sup> Barth throws doubt upon it, because if grace is alongside nature, no matter how high above it may be put, it is surely no longer the grace of God, but the grace which humans themselves ascribes to themselves.<sup>74</sup>

Nature, he asserts, has no autonomous or independent freedom alongside or primacy over the freedom of grace, whereas it is subjected by grace to a kind

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>71</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 85.

<sup>73</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 97.

<sup>74</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 139.

of *Aufhebung* instead: 'Nature is affirmed, negated, and then reconstituted on the higher plane.'<sup>75</sup> As Hunsinger depicts, 'In its distinction as a reality other than and over against grace, nature is affirmed, but in its corruption' as a reality that supposes itself to be autonomously grounded apart from grace, nature is rejected.<sup>76</sup> In its destiny as a reality to be drawn beyond itself into genuine fellowship with grace, the negation is negated, and the nature is miraculously reconstituted on a higher plane.'<sup>77</sup> It is evident that the relationship between nature and grace, which revolves round the Hegelian *Denkform*, is dialectical. However, seeing that 'grace, as the power and authority of God over men, can never be identified with the actions or with the passivity of the men of this world'.<sup>78</sup>

It becomes quite clear that, for Barth, whatsoever the human does is 'nature' whereas whatsoever God does is 'grace'; human nature in itself in any case has no *autonomous* capacity for co-operating with God except in the act and power of the Holy Spirit and in faith and therefore by grace. Therefore nature cannot operate alongside grace without diminishing the sovereign and free grace of God of its authentic characteristic as grace. Natural theology in empowering human nature to be unqualified, impairs divine grace as cheap grace, revelation to be non-revelation, and God as a general idea of a Supreme being, and is repudiated by *the free grace of God in Jesus Christ*.

## **2. The '*analogia entis*' as a vehicle of natural theology**

Barth's other painstaking and relentless campaign against natural theology

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<sup>75</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 98.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. Cf. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 215.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

is the rejection of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the *analogia entis*,<sup>79</sup> principally in association with Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of analogy and with the Thomist Erich Przywara, who was the first to use the term and to make the 'final clarity' of it, as an inner core of natural theology.<sup>80</sup> As McGrath points out, *analogia entis*, as the Roman Catholic Church understands it, means:

God created the world and points to a fundamental *analogia entis* between God and the world. There is a continuity between God and the world on account of the expression of the being of God in the being of the world. For this reason, it is legitimate to use entities within the created order as analogies for God. In doing this, theology does not reduce God to the level of a created object or being; it merely affirms that there is a likeness or correspondence between God and that being, which allows the latter to act as a signpost to God. A created entity can be *like* God, without being *identical* to God.<sup>81</sup>

However, Hunsinger points out that the *analogia entis* is postulated as gripping two substances simultaneously: a 'constitutive (ontic) state of affairs and an 'epistemic' (noetic) procedure constructed upon it. The constitutive state of affairs is one in which the human race is, in a certain degree, 'inherently

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<sup>79</sup> McCormack points out that Barth appropriates the concept of the *analogia entis* from Erich Przywara and first discussed it in his lectures entitled 'Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie' given in Dortmund in March 1929, published as 'Fate and Idea in Theology' in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt, trans. George Hunsinger [Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986], 25-61. (McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 384-385; n. 26). In regard to Barth's negative rendition of the *analogia entis* cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar's criticism of Barth's explication of Aquinas' doctrine of the *analogia entis* in *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S. J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 161-167; Jung Young Lee, 'Karl Barth's Use of Analogy in His Church Dogmatics,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 22.2 (1969), 129-151; Robert E. Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 214f, n. 4; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Boer (London: Paternoster, 1956), 179-195.

<sup>80</sup> For useful comparison, however, in favour of Aquinas, between the two theologians' attitudes towards natural theology upon the bases of the analogy between God and the world and of their interpretations of *Romans* 1: 1-25 see Henry Chavannes, *The Analogy between God and the World in Saint Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, trans. William Lumley (New York: Vantage Press, 1992), 99-218; Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (London: Notre Dame University Press, 1995), 73-165; 183ff. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. T. Thompson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 144-145.

<sup>81</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 135.

open to and capable of knowing God'.<sup>82</sup> 'The procedure is then', he continues, 'one in which this inherent openness and capacity are exercised such that God becomes known, regardless of how provisionally. As the premise behind natural theology, the *analogia entis* seems to underwrite almost everything Barth takes to be theologically impossible.'<sup>83</sup>

Thus the major premise of the *analogia entis*, even of the whole Roman Catholic dogmatics, starting from the supposition of a 'being' common to human beings and God, supposes that the being of God is similar to the being of the human and that, consequently, human beings can obtain a knowledge of God apart from His revelation in Christ. It suggests that God the Creator either reveals or has *already* revealed Himself in His creation other than Jesus Christ and that this forms an origin of knowledge of God without Jesus Christ. It 'describes the place from which it ascertains its way of knowledge as the self-originating and self-grounded reality of divine revelation and the corresponding supernatural faith.'<sup>84</sup> In so doing, it reduces the biblical assertion from 'the knowability of God only from His revelation...to [an] interpretation of the *analogia entis*.'<sup>85</sup> For 'their presupposition is that the being of the Church, Jesus Christ, is no longer the free Lord of its *existence*, but that He is...restricted and conditioned by certain concrete forms of the human understanding of His revelation and of the faith which grasps it.'<sup>86</sup> Barth deems

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<sup>82</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 283, n. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. He translates Barth's terms, ontic and noetic, into 'constitutive' and 'epistemic'. The former is made more understandable whereas the latter can be more polemic. Owing to 'epistemic' assumes a positive meaning, which is exactly what Barth tries to avoid when he use 'noetic'.

<sup>84</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 81.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 81ff; cf. 243.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., I/1, 40 [italics mine].

this to be the *same* ‘heresy’ as Mariology<sup>87</sup> to which Roman Catholicism has committed itself in the battle against the Reformation, and with which the ‘evangelical faith’ stands in conflict.<sup>88</sup>

With Barth ‘evangelical faith’ is merely by God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit and, hence, it is only by an act of God’s free grace and by faith that human beings can know God as He has actually shown Himself to be, in accordance with the witness of the Bible. He really is (and not on the foundation of human deduction or induction, in particular on the basis of an *analogia entis*) the Lord over all things and in His one undivided Being at once the Creator as well as the Reconciler and Redeemer. He is categorically unique, not only in His aseity, divinity, sovereignty and freedom but also in His incomparable love, which lead Him to be not only the God who is ‘for us’ but also the God who in Jesus Christ is ‘with us’ assuming the human nature.<sup>89</sup> All this could not be known by human beings apart from revelation; rather, the ‘uniqueness’ of God can be known exclusively by His revelation.

In this regard Barth also condemns the liberal Protestantism ‘from Schleiermacher by way of Ritschl to Herrmann’,<sup>90</sup> which has degenerated Christian faith into human sentiment and self-consciousness, and Brunner’s concepts of ‘*imago Dei*’ and ‘point of contact’, instinctive within human beings as the conformity to God and the capacity for His Word, to be ‘only a

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<sup>87</sup> Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 180.

<sup>88</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 34.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

hair's breadth from the Roman Catholic doctrine of the *analogia entis*.<sup>91</sup> The former 'makes a Christian a Christian...neither is nor has to be an original encounter of God with man but...the continuum of religious stimulation'<sup>92</sup> through history; whereas the latter degrades faith into 'an analogy that can be surveyed and perceived...from an onlooker's standpoint',<sup>93</sup> and on account of which the evident 'destruction of Protestant theology and the Protestant Church' is brought about.<sup>94</sup> As a consequence, Barth relentlessly and persistently refuses the legitimacy of the *analogia entis* and rebukes it as the 'invention of the Antichrist',<sup>95</sup> the 'real point of defection from the gospel.'<sup>96</sup>

On the matter of Barth's attack on the baleful common denominator between Liberalism and Catholicism, as opposed to the *bona fide* Christian faith, little objection can be made to Hans Urs von Balthasar's observation that while battling against the Catholic Church the actual, but hidden, target of Barth's gunfire was Schleiermacher: 'We will seldom go astray if we find the very points Barth fought over Schleiermacher (for the first time!) later being projected onto Catholic teaching. Even when Barth is battling against Catholicism, he is basically struggling to purify Schleiermacher. In fact, his anti-Catholic polemic makes no sense outside of his confrontation with Schleiermacher.'<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 239. Cf. II/1, 232

<sup>92</sup> Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 31. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 36-38.

<sup>93</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 239.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 180.

<sup>97</sup> Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 201.

### III. The Barth-Brunner Debate

In a booklet titled *Nature and Grace* published in 1934, Brunner argues that ‘the centre on which everything turns is the centre of the *theologia naturalis*’, therefore, ‘the task of our theological generation is to find the way back to a true *theologia naturalis*.’<sup>98</sup> He pleads for a Protestant natural theology which he wants to base on six ideas; they are, *imago Dei*, general revelation, preserving grace, divine ordinances, point of contact, and the contention that grace does not abolish nature, but perfects it.<sup>99</sup> Therefore natural theology, pursuant to Brunner, can be and needs to be corrected and supplemented by the self-revelation of God. Barth’s reply to Brunner appearing in the October of the same year concisely entitled *Nein! Answer to Emil Brunner*. For the benefit of the Church and theology Barth has no doubt that he must firmly say “No!” to Brunner’s positive evaluation of natural theology.<sup>100</sup> The next section will consider Barth’s rejective reply to Brunner’s six theses together in the order in which Brunner has presented them for the sake of gaining a clear sketch of and firm grasp on the issues of the public debate.

In his introductory book on Karl Barth Colin Brown provides a clear background against which an overview of the debate can be seen.<sup>101</sup> Apart from Brown, both Parker and Joan O’Donovan have also offered succinct but insightful analyses of the debate,<sup>102</sup> and it is to their insightful analyses that the

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<sup>98</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 59.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 69ff.

<sup>101</sup> Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (London: Tyndale Press, 1967), 79-88. Cf. Edward A. Dowey, Jr, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 265-267.

<sup>102</sup> Parker, ‘Barth on Revelation’, 366-382; Joan O’Donovan, ‘Man in the Image of God: The Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 39 (1986): 433-459.



following remarks on the famous Barth-Brunner debate are referred.

(I) *The Issues in Question--Brunner's Accusation and Barth's Rejoinder*

**1. The *imago Dei***

Brunner's first thesis begins with the issue of the human who is created in the *imago Dei*. He locates this approach in the doctrine of creation, particularly the notion that 'human beings are created in the image of God.<sup>103</sup> He 'reproaches' Barth's claim that the image has totally been destroyed by sin.<sup>104</sup> On the contrary, Brunner draws a difference between the *formal* and *material* features of the *imago*. The *formal* image is what differentiates the human from animals, namely, the human is a rational and responsible creature.<sup>105</sup> This then is the theological significance of the fallen humanity; this is the formal or Old Testament image, a responsible existence, a guilty existence before God. Human beings cannot escape from this confrontation without ceasing to be human beings, and by their own efforts they cannot return to original righteousness, or move forward to salvation. In one passage Brunner writes: 'we have to consider the image of God in man in two ways: one formal and one material.'<sup>106</sup> The formal *imago* denotes the precedence of human beings in the created world. Brunner argues: 'This *function* or calling as a bearer of the image is not only not abolished by sin; rather is it the presupposition of the ability to sin and continues within the state of sin.'<sup>107</sup> He further argues:

We distinguish categorically: formally the *imago* is not in the least

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<sup>103</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 20.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 80.

<sup>106</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 23.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

touched--whether sinful or not, man is a subject and is responsible. Materially the *imago* is completely lost, man is a sinner through and through and there is nothing in him which is not defiled by sin.<sup>108</sup>

To make a long story short, the *imago Dei* in human beings is not entirely destroyed by the Fall, accordingly, when God's revelation comes, human beings are still endowed with an intelligent and responsible nature with capacity for it. It is worth noting that this, Brunner thinks, paves the way for natural theology.

Nevertheless Barth is doubtful: 'Does this mean that [a human being's] reason is therefore more "suited" for defining the nature of God than anything else in the world? What is the relevance of the "capacity for revelation" to the fact that man is man?'<sup>109</sup> He argues that the 'contention, that the human's undistorted *formal* likeness to God and "capacity for revelation" provide the objective possibility of revelation, proves nothing for the good of natural theology, unless Brunner also means to say that the human is actually possessed of some revelation of God which is innately in him or her as part of that capacity.<sup>110</sup> The fact that human beings are the *formal imago Dei* but not the *material* one makes no contribution whatever to his or her being saved. On Barth's part, revelation 'is not something which the human has already in his or her possession, or which can eventually be obtained from his or her own sinful, inherent capacity'.<sup>111</sup>

## 2. General revelation

Secondly, Brunner impugns Barth for elevating special revelation in Jesus

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>109</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 79.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 81.

Christ at the cost of general revelation in nature.<sup>112</sup> In opposition to Barth's denial of general revelation, Brunner asserts that special revelation and general revelation are not mutually exclusive, rather, God 'leaves the imprint of his nature upon what he does,' to the effect that 'the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation.'<sup>113</sup> This is the faith in which Christians believe, whereby a twofold revelation is recognised. The first revelation is in God's creation, which is known to human beings in all its magnitude; and the second is, indeed, in Jesus Christ through the belief in whom human beings, even though made blind by sin, can clearly perceive the former.<sup>114</sup>

Face to face with Brunner's accusation Barth devotes himself to discovering the contradictory points in Brunner's argument. He points out that Brunner intends to contend that the world is 'somehow recognisable' to human beings as the creation of God, but also that 'sin makes man *blind* for what is visibly set before us.'<sup>115</sup> Undoubtedly one has to make an immediate decision for the one and only way in defiance of the principle of excluded middle.

In *Church Dogmatics* I/2 Barth writes: 'According to Holy Scripture God's revelation takes place in the fact that God's Word became a man and that this person has become God's Word. The incarnation of the eternal Word, Jesus Christ, is God's revelation.'<sup>116</sup> Parker offers an explanation for what Barth means by the above argument.

Incarnation here is not taken only as His coming into the world, but as His being and activity in the world. The name Jesus Christ signifies the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 26f.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 80. Cf. Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 82.

<sup>116</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 1.

man Jesus of Nazareth who was the eternal Son of God; it signifies the words and deeds of this man as the words and deeds of the Son of God; the suffering, dying, and rising again of this man as the activity of the Son of God.<sup>117</sup>

The incarnation of the *Logos Dei* is the revelation of God Himself. That is to say, the knowledge of God originates only from God's self-revelation and God's encounter with human beings too is solely in the person Jesus.<sup>118</sup> God has placed His self-revelation exclusively on one specific *locus* the person Jesus—his 'life of suffering, death, and resurrection'.<sup>119</sup> To sum up, '[t]he revelation of God is localised in Jesus Christ.'<sup>120</sup>

Barth, regardless of making nothing of 'what [Brunner] means by "capacity for revelation"', claims that a knowledge of God without Christ but through creation, namely, general revelation or *theologia naturalis*, is at best 'a systematic exposition' of human intellectual and rational activities, at worst 'idolatry.'<sup>121</sup>

### 3. Preserving grace

In his third thesis on 'preserving grace' Brunner impeaches Barth as not so much elevating the *uniqueness* of the saving grace of God in Christ, as absolutely renouncing the *universality* of that grace is also working in God's creation and His preservation of the universe.<sup>122</sup> Brunner propounds that there has to be grace of preservation, different from grace of salvation, which does not eradicate sin engendered by human activities, including political evildoing, but merely the worst after effect of it, for whenever the notions of an almighty,

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<sup>117</sup> Parker, 'Barth on Revelation', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 372.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 81f.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 20f.

merciful God and sin are taken thoughtfully, a concept of God's gracious preservation is bound to emanate.<sup>123</sup> In sum, Brunner insists,

human activity comes within the purview of divine grace--not of redeeming but the preserving grace. All activity of man which the creator himself uses to preserve his creation amid the corruption of sin belongs to this type of activity within preserving grace. *It is from this that the doctrine of civil and secular functions and offices is derived.*<sup>124</sup>

This, again, directly and explicitly provides a foundation for natural theology, and indirectly and implicitly for the Nazis and the German-Christians. Against this, Barth insists that 'there are not two sorts of grace but one, that is, the unique saving grace of Christ, revealed in the Gospel'; all what Brunner 'refers to as preserving grace is decidedly another aspect of saving grace'.<sup>125</sup> The position that Barth holds here is that 'all God's dealings with human beings are merely effected in and through the person of Christ'.<sup>126</sup>

#### **4. The divine ordinances**

Brunner's fourth point is precisely an extension of preserving grace, in regard to Barth's repudiation of the view that the human has the capacity of receiving God's benign intervention in the world in certain ordinances.<sup>127</sup> Brunner explains using the example of marriage, 'the essential nature of which remains uncorrupted by the Fall, as an "ordinance of creation", and the State, the function of which is to examine sin, as an "ordinance of preservation"'.<sup>128</sup> This again pave the way for natural theology.<sup>129</sup> At this point, as regards the 'clarity

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<sup>123</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 83.

<sup>124</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 27-29 [italics mine]. The idea can be traced back to the Lutheran doctrine of the *ordo creationis*, order of creation.

<sup>125</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 83.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 21.

<sup>128</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 84.

<sup>129</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 29-31.

and certainty of knowledge,' in spite of the fact that Barth 'concedes the existence of certain moral and social maxims',<sup>130</sup> he concludes this point by ironically questioning Brunner:

Do instinct and reason really tell us what is *the* form of matrimony, which would then have to be acknowledged and proclaimed as a divine ordinance of creation?...would not the physical, biological and chemical 'law of nature' or certain axioms of mathematics have a much greater claim to be called ordinances of creation,' since they are clearer and more certain than what Brunner has contested?<sup>131</sup>

## 5. Point of contact

At this most controversial point of their debate closely relating to the notion of the *imago Dei*, Barth is accused of denying that the grace of Christ encounters any inborn point of contact in human beings. Barth asserts: 'It is not permissible to speak of the 'point of contact' for the saving action of God. For this would contradict the sole activity of the saving grace of Christ, which is the centre of the theology of the Bible and the Reformation.'<sup>132</sup> By contrast, Brunner's view falls back on his foregoing distinction between the *formal* and *material* aspects of the *imago Dei*.<sup>133</sup>

No one... can deny that there is such a thing as a point of contact for the divine grace of redemption. This point of contact is the formal *imago Dei*, which [means]...capacity for words and responsibility.... It is purely *formal possibility of his being addressed*. This possibility of his being addressed is also the presupposition of man's responsibility.... Only a being that can be addressed is capable of sin. But in sinning, while being responsible, it somehow or other knows of its sin. This knowledge of sin is a necessary presupposition of the understanding of the divine message of grace.<sup>134</sup>

Human nature, according to Brunner, is constructed in such a shape that

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<sup>130</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 86.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural theology*, 21.

<sup>133</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 84.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 31 [italics mine].

there is an analogy with the being of God. In spite of the fact that human nature is apt to sin, the capacity for perceiving God in nature remains unabated. Sinful human beings remain capable of recognising God in nature and history, and to be aware of their guilt before God.<sup>135</sup> There is, hence, a *Anknüpfungspunkt*, the ‘point of contact,’ ‘the objective possibility of divine revelation,’ within human nature.<sup>136</sup> Human nature is such that there is a *built-in* point of contact for the revelation of God. Revelation addresses a human nature which already has some concept of what that revelation really is. Brunner argues that ‘the revelation of God in Jesus Christ’ constantly emphasised in the Gospel makes little sense, unless human beings already have some idea of what ‘revelation’ is.<sup>137</sup>

Brunner also insists that God has, to a certain extent, revealed Himself to all human beings, and that the human race can neither deny nor conceive of any human nature which is not already aware of confrontation with God. In order to expand his arguments, he compounds three expressive terms. He speaks of human beings’ ‘*Ansprechbarkeit*’ or “addressability”; of their *Wortmächtigkeit*, which might perhaps be translated as “verbicompetence”; and of human beings themselves as *wortempfängliches Wesen*, “word-receptive being”.<sup>138</sup> For the human

has an immeasurable advantage over all other creatures, even as a sinner, and this he has in common with God: he is a subject, a rational creature.... Not even as a sinner does he cease to be one with whom one can speak, with whom therefore also God can speak. And this is the very nature of

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 31f.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Oxford, 1941; reprint ed., 1959), 29. Cf. also Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, 37-57, especially 40-47; Trevor Hart, ‘A Capacity for Ambiguity? The Barth-Brunner Debate Revisited,’ *Tyndale Bulletin*, 44.2 (1993), 289-305, especially 294-298.

man: to be responsible. Even as a sinner man is responsible.<sup>139</sup>

As a result human beings' intelligence and sense of responsibility (the *formal* aspect of the image of God) contribute a natural point of contact.

Once more, Barth 'launches a swashbuckling attack on Brunner's self-contradictions.'<sup>140</sup> Firstly, if, in accordance with Brunner's definitions, the *formal* possibility of being addressed were human beings' responsibility to make decisions, then new-born babies and idiots would certainly be excluded from being part of the human beings for whom Christ has died.<sup>141</sup> For neither can they make decisions let alone be responsible for their own decisions. Secondly, if the human is *materially* 'a sinner through and through,' then the *formal* substance of the human is so impotent as not to be 'anything like a remainder of some original righteousness, an openness and readiness for God'.<sup>142</sup> Barth indicates that in any utilisation of the 'construction of a natural theology Brunner ought to show what, in fact, he admits cannot be shown'<sup>143</sup>: that the *formal* aspect of the *imago Dei* carries in it an *a priori* knowledge of God; otherwise the point is by no means relevant to the establishment of a natural theology.<sup>144</sup> No matter how it may be, Barth stresses that human beings have been thoroughly deprived of the capacity for God by sin.

## **6. *Gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit?***

In Brunner's last thesis, Barth is alleged to have dismissed and replaced

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<sup>139</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural Theology*, 23.

<sup>140</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 85.

<sup>141</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural Theology*, 23, 89.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 89.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 89f. Actually Barth's disclamation of Brunner's concept of the 'point of contact' has already appeared earlier, in 1932 in *Church Dogmatics* I/1, (238) than his public debate with Brunner.



human beings' former natures by regenerating grace. Brunner burdens Barth with the criticism that he over-elevates grace at the cost of nature.<sup>145</sup> Nonetheless, Brunner maintains that this Latin phrase--*gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*--verifies a significant truth which sustains natural theology. In his defence of the point, he again resorts to his differentiation between the *formal* and *material* features of the *image Dei* in human beings, and explains that 'conversion does not abolish our human natures; it but changes something that is already there'.<sup>146</sup> He mentions that in Galatians 2:20 as Paul discusses the 'death of the old nature and of Christ living in a person, he does not mean that the person's human personality is abolished; it refers to the *material* aspect only, and the *formal* one remains'.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, Brunner avers that 1 Corinthians 2: 10-12, he paraphrases: 'In so far as we have the Holy Spirit, there takes place in us an act of divine self-consciousness through the Holy Spirit.'<sup>148</sup> It is in no wise means that human nature is destroyed by grace. 'Faith is not mysticism, and to believe does not make a human being identical with Christ'.<sup>149</sup>

On this point Brunner had again gone into an argumentative *cul-de-sac* and, hence, missed the point. For on the score of establishing his argument for a natural theology, Brown believes, 'Brunner would have to signify that the passages he adduces above presuppose a natural theology and affinity with God as the prerequisite for new life in Christ'.<sup>150</sup> Nonetheless, as Barth proceeds to demonstrate, 1 Corinthians 2: 14 implies that this knowledge is a gift of the Holy

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<sup>145</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Nature and Grace*, 21.

<sup>146</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 85-86.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>148</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Nature and Grace*, 34.

<sup>149</sup> Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 86.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

Spirit over the head of the natural human. With regard to in Galatians 2: 20, the old nature is not so much a path leading the natural human to God, as a wall to be demolished. Barth points out that the focal point of the passages at issue, together with that of 2 Corinthians 5, ‘falls neither on the abolition nor “*reparatio*” (reparation) of human nature, but on the *miracle*’ performed on human beings by grace in making them new creatures.<sup>151</sup> He contends that ‘so if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away...[and] everything has become new!’ is by no means metaphorical but should by all means be understood in the most literal sense.<sup>152</sup> The Christian ‘has become a new man, a new creature--because of his “formal” aptitude for it is the most *uninteresting* and his “material” aptitude the most *impossible* thing in the world and hence they cannot be problems.’<sup>153</sup>

Barth understands the ‘point of contact’ as *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit*, ‘capacity for revelation,’ by which is obviously meant that human beings can “‘somehow” and “to some extent” know and do the will of God without revelation’.<sup>154</sup> For him, there is neither ‘point of contact’ implanted within human nature nor between the Christian gospel and human nature. The Gospel, when it is preached, has nothing to do with what was there before, but rather replaces all that was there before with something absolutely different and completely new. The soul and mind of the Christian is thus, in the most exact sense, a new creation. Any such ‘point of contact’ and ‘capacity for revelation’ is

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<sup>151</sup> Barth and Brunner., *Nature and Grace*, 93. Cf. Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 86.

<sup>152</sup> 2 *Corinthian* 5: 17 (All scriptural passages quoted from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated).

<sup>153</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Natural Theology*, 94. Cf. Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 86.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

*de facto* the outcome of the revelation of God. In fact, the grace that originates from the Word of God, rather than inherently in human nature.<sup>155</sup>

## (II) *An Evaluation of the Debate*

Having given a general overview of the debate, it is necessary to evaluate the debate. As O'Donovan observes, it is Brunner's intention's in the booklet *Nature and Grace* to propose a reconstruction of *theologia naturalis* on a solid basis of the Scriptures and the Reformation in line with the principles of 'Scripture alone' and 'grace alone'.<sup>156</sup> 'A reconstructed natural theology, Brunner insists, should be methodologically committed to sustaining the dialectical interdependence of nature and grace so as to preserve the ontological and epistemological priority of grace over nature.'<sup>157</sup> And Brunner insists that the fundamental elements of the created humanity is shaped by the very formal-material twofoldness of the image of God.<sup>158</sup> O'Donovan notes that the reason why Brunner eagers to regard the 'formal image' as spiritual, moral and ethical capabilities is to substantiate the nature-grace dialectic on the foundation of the duality of the image of God.<sup>159</sup> For Brunner, therefore, the idea of humanity as responsible person assumes a distinctive and significant quality (morality or conscience) of knowing one's own guilt that enables human beings' capability to be addressed by the command word of God.<sup>160</sup> 'It is only as they are addressed that human beings are capable of knowing their sin, and so

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> O'Donovan, 'Man in the Image of God: The Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered', 436.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

are capable of “understanding...the divine message of grace”.<sup>161</sup>

In response to the challenging notion of a liberal Protestantist-oriented natural law presented by Brunner Barth intends to diminish the dialectic relation between grace and nature. For Barth the dialectic relation is theologically unsustainable which results in contradictive and unbiblical ambiguity.<sup>162</sup> Actually Barth does not deny Brunner’s differentiation of the image of God as formal and material, but the way he uses. As O’Donovan accurately points out: ‘Barth directs his attack not against the distinction of ‘formal’ and ‘material’ *per se*, but against the dialectical use to which Brunner puts it. He concedes to Brunner the ‘incontrovertible’ truth that sinful human beings retain the *humanum*, the *quod* of personality, the personal structure of existence as subjectivity, as decision.’<sup>163</sup> He considers Brunner has crossed the biblical boundary by proclaiming and mistreating the formal image of God as ‘the dialectical precondition’ of the work of grace.<sup>164</sup> As a result of Brunner’s favour for an extra-biblical natural law:

In order that the ‘formal’ *imago* comprise one pole of the nature-grace dialectic, it must abandon its formality and acquire ‘material’ content, to the effect that it must acquire content which stands in a positive relationship to the matter of revelation. This content, that belies Brunner’s ‘formal’ *imago* from the outset, is the natural knowledge of God available to sinful human beings in the order of external nature, in the historical experience of communities, and in the dictates and indictments of the conscience.<sup>165</sup>

This is what Barth can never accept. In sum, O’Donovan says, Barth’s

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 347. Cf. Joseph Dabney Bettis, ‘Theology in the Public Debate: Barth’s Rejection of Natural Theology and the Hermeneutical Problem,’ *Scottish Journal Theology*, 22.4 (1969): 385-403. See also Barth’s definition of natural theology in *Nature and Grace*, 75-76.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 439.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

criticism of the ‘anthropological significance of Brunner’s concept of “formal image” resides in its theological limiting function: this “form” would not constitute man’s essential being and unique dignity unless it sheltered a material “capacity for revelation”.’<sup>166</sup>

By criticising Brunner Barth is actually making a strong case against Brunner’s assumption that the sinful nature in humanity as formal possibilities is not identical with the material possibilities that indicates human beings’ inherent relationship to the free and privileged grace of God.<sup>167</sup> Precisely Barth is in favour of a knowledge of a universal image of God rather than an exclusively restricted one.<sup>168</sup> As a result, according to O’Donovan, Brunner’s ‘functional deflation of the “formal aspect” signals the collapse of the nature-grace dialectic in its epistemological and ontological aspects’.<sup>169</sup> Owing to the fact that ‘no longer can the persisting structure of sinful human subjectivity, conceived as responsibility, constitute the necessary condition or “point of contact” for God’s gracious self-revelation to human beings.’<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, Barth avers that the qualitative discontinuity and irreparability between the old and new human nature, and the radical newness of the Gospel in the light of Paul’s teaching, do not merely rebuff Brunner’s arguments *toto caelo*, but also suppress the ‘humanistic premise of liberal Protestantism since Schleiermacher’.<sup>171</sup> On Barth’s side, ‘it is useless to speak of ‘natural human beings’ who confront the options of faith and unbelief due to such, as the model implies that human beings

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Nature and Grace*, 75.

are the subject and God is a predicate, which may or may not be accepted.’<sup>172</sup> Consequently, natural theology, in the sense of Barth’s definition, is a blind alley. It is ‘incapable of leading to a coherent, detailed knowledge of God’ and only a *pseudo-presupposition*.<sup>173</sup>

In disagreement with Brunner’s suggestion that the *imago Dei* in human beings has been separated as *quod* (form) and *quid* (matter) by sin, John Baillie points out that Brunner fails to recognise that if the *quid completely* vanished, the *quod* itself would no longer exist either.<sup>174</sup> Baillie points out, God’s creation of human beings is a ‘miracle of grace’. By ‘miracle of grace’ he means that God entitles human beings with free will (*justitia originalis* or *ratio*), ‘the capacity for what counts before God as good’, whereby human beings are differentiated from the other creatures, and only in this sense can grace be *genuine* grace.<sup>175</sup> ‘It is, in fact, not a miracle of sheer omnipotence, but *a miracle of grace*. And the exercise of grace always implies a certain self-limitation on the part of omnipotence, since there can only be grace where there is *free acceptance* in the absence of all coercion.’<sup>176</sup> Brunner, Baillie argues, fails to see that if beneficence were no more to have any appeal to human beings, then the human’s choice of maleficence ‘would no longer be a *choice* at all, nor in any sense whatsoever the act of a free moral agent.’<sup>177</sup> It is precisely at this point that Brunner contradicts himself in what he has strongly insisted, i.e. the responsibility of human beings, which, consequently results in his analysis of the

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<sup>172</sup> Bettis, ‘Theology in the Public Debate: Barth’s Rejection of Natural Theology and the Hermeneutical Problem,’ 386.

<sup>173</sup> Barth and Brunner, *Nature and Grace*, 75.

<sup>174</sup> Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, 33.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

*imago Dei* on the whole a *petito principii*.

On the other hand, Barth's insistence that human beings, once in the *imago Dei*, have become '*mente alienati*', totally irrational, since the Fall, is unacceptable.<sup>178</sup> If, according to Barth, human beings entirely lost their reason, they, as Brunner has criticised, were not responsible for their malfeasance. Hence, there is a *fallen* reason which remains in human nature.<sup>179</sup> God bestowed upon human beings a gracious gift, free will (reason), but instead of assuming a loyal stewardship, sharing the joy of mastering the created world with God, they abused it by attempting to identify themselves with the God who created them.<sup>180</sup> As a result, in contrast to what they had wished to achieve, they fell. They lost the capacity for practising 'what counts before God as good'; instead, there is a *fallen* reason, liable to the evil things in rebellion against God, remaining in them, to the effect that, the human has been deprived of free will since the Fall.<sup>181</sup> However, despite the fact that human beings have utterly lost the capacity for doing or even desiring any good thing, they remain *fallibly* rational. Human beings, therefore, are indisputably responsible for the maleficence that they have done.<sup>182</sup> Since the Fall the fallibly human nature is so corrupted that it needs to be 'crucified with Jesus Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and [the human] might no longer be enslaved to sin,'<sup>183</sup> thus becoming a new and free person 'alive to God in Jesus Christ'.<sup>184</sup> And because 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself', human beings, accordingly, are capable of

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> *Romans* 6: 6

<sup>184</sup> *Romans* 6: 11.

discerning God through Jesus Christ.<sup>185</sup>

According to O'Donovan, obviously Barth's rejection to Brunner's dialectical image of God gives certain problems of conceptualising human beings theologically unresolved. First of all, Barth's argument that faith reconciled in Christ is the real 'point of contact' for the revelation of God implies a relational and Christological understanding of the indispensable being of humanity.<sup>186</sup> Secondly, however, by contrast, his acceptance of a theologically approved office that the 'formal image' plays as a token of 'the continuity of personal identity in sin and faith, leaves open the possibility of an immanent structural concept of human beings--as subjectivity, personality, responsibility'.<sup>187</sup>

Aside from dealing in issues with Barth on the points which have been examined, particularly on sweeping up obstacles and uplifting the value of the image of God, Brunner has no additional constructive argument.<sup>188</sup> Brunner's *theologia naturalis*, as Barth construes it, straddles two boats: it wishes to retain the Reformed emphasis on salvation *sola gratia et fides*, and at the same time claims that human beings could know something about God *secundum naturam*.<sup>189</sup> However, Barth points out that the two counter ideas rule each other out, because genuine knowledge of God is the unique work of God's grace.<sup>190</sup> Barth's all-embracing view in the whole debate can be formulated like this: Human beings together with their formally and materially

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<sup>185</sup> 2 *Corinthians* 5: 19.

<sup>186</sup> O'Donovan, 'Man in the Image of God: The Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered', 443.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, 58-60.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.



sinful ‘secular orders’ can only be saved by Jesus Christ in His capacity as the unique revelation and the only saving grace of God to the human in whom the old human nature is in no wise ‘repaired or perfected’ but radically crucified and replaced by something essentially distinct and entirely new.<sup>191</sup>

Brunner’s six theses, appealing to nature in *Nature and Grace*, build neither on the Reformational basis of ‘*sola scriptura*’ nor on ‘*sola gratia*’. Rather, they underlie the ideas known as ‘the orders of creation’<sup>192</sup> and the ‘*operationes Dei externae*’<sup>193</sup> which had been absorbed and further developed by nineteenth-century German liberal Protestantism. It is, however, significant to note again that their debate over nature and grace occurred in 1934 when the tyrant Hitler took control over Germany. Barth is worried that Brunner may have unintentionally founded for the state, or even Hitler, a theological basis to be conceived as God. For instance, coinciding with Brunner’s insistence on ‘preserving grace’ and the ‘divine ordinances’ which exemplify and legitimate the ‘civil and secular functions and offices’, certainly including the Nazis’ government, the German-Christians declare: ‘We see in race, folk and nation, orders of existence granted and entrusted to us by God. God’s law for us is that we look to the *preservation of these orders*.’<sup>194</sup> In addition, corresponding to Brunner’s notions of ‘general revelation’, ‘point of contact’ and ‘capacity for revelation’, the German-Christians announce: ‘Our Chancellor, is for us *a present from God*, given in a time of decision.... *Christ has come to us through*

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 85-86.

<sup>193</sup> The ‘external works of God’, branching off the *opus naturae* and the *opus gratiae*, consist in the *ad extra* action of divine will, might and mercy, such as; the creation, providence of the world (*opus naturae*) and the redemption of believers (*opus gratiae*).

<sup>194</sup> From ‘The Guiding Principles of the Faith Movement of the “German Christians”’, 6 June, 1932; cited in Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 222 [italics mine].

*Adolf Hitler.... Hitler struck out for us, and through his power, his honesty, his faith and his idealism, the Redeemer found us...We know today the Saviour has come.*<sup>195</sup>

As a result of this announcement Hitler is *prima facie* identified with a ‘general revelation’ under the illusion of his being ‘a present from God’ through which Christ has come to the German-Christians. He is also identified with a ‘point of contact between the German-Christians and God, and considered the ‘capacity for revelation’ whereby they ‘hear the call of our God’. Barth’s unmitigated attacks on the arbitrary *analogies* between Hitler and God, between German nature and God’s creation, and on at the German-Christians’ deployment with depraved political intention seems to have been presaged in his early criticism of the classic Catholic concept of nature (alongside grace) and the *analogia entis*.

From the foregoing discussions of Barth’s negative attitude towards natural theology, insofar as his understanding of what Christian theology should be, and thus stressing the *infinite qualitative distinction* between God and humans, because *God is God*, it is significant to note that he does not merely intend to defend God’s divinity against being assimilated to or even absorbed into nature, faith to feeling and Christian theology to anthropology, but also to have human beings’ sinful *status quo* saved by grace in Jesus Christ. This is, for Barth, an admonitory reminder of the categorical ‘command of God’, as an ‘order of creation’, whose nature is ‘Christian’ rather than ‘natural’.<sup>196</sup> In Barth’s eyes, the common platitude in all kinds of *theologia naturalis*, which

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<sup>195</sup> J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (London: Weidenfeil and Nicolson, 1968), 48 [italics mine].

<sup>196</sup> Barth, *Ethics*, 119.

justifies him in renouncing them as a whole, is their undertaking to 'comprise the transcendent otherness of divine revelation by imposing on it a conceptual straitjacket.'<sup>197</sup> Only by emphasising the infinite qualitative difference, as Barth sees it, between the Creator and the created can God be authentically 'recognised as God in the sheer majesty of his divine nature and in his absolutely unique existence and power, while man...could be free...to be truly and genuinely human.'<sup>198</sup>

While Barth may wish *theologia naturalis* had never existed at all, he does not deny but concedes the existence of it, in so far as natural theology, which interweaves in the history of human thought in general and intertwines in Liberal Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in particular, is not something that can be overlooked *in toto*. For its existence has simultaneously been confirmed upon one's attempt of renouncing it. It should by all means be treated soberly as though it is the natural human's 'only hope and consolation in life and death.'<sup>199</sup> To wit, 'the claim to a natural knowledge of God,...cannot be separated out from the whole movement of man in which he seeks to justify himself over against the grace of God, and which can only develop into a natural theology that is antithetical to knowledge of God as He really is in His acts of revelation and grace.'<sup>200</sup>

Barth does not intend to deny the possibility of an *abstract* natural

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<sup>197</sup> Paul Avis, *The Method of Modern Theology: The Dream of Reason* (Hants: Marshall Pickering Publication, 1986), 43.

<sup>198</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 137.

<sup>199</sup> Henri Bouillard, *The Knowledge of God*, trans. S. D. Femiano (London: SCM Press, 1969), 14ff.

<sup>200</sup> Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 142.

knowledge of God ‘made by idealist philosophy’,<sup>201</sup> nor to disprove of the ‘rational structure’, but its *would-be* ‘independent character’ deviating from the saving grace and self-revealing of God in Jesus Christ. The ‘rational structure’ of natural theology can exclusively be constructed on ‘the understanding of faith and comes into light as we inquire into its objective ground in God Himself.’<sup>202</sup> Only in this sense can Aquinas’ dictum, ‘*gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit et complet,*’ be justified.<sup>203</sup> This, frankly, explains why Barth must ceaselessly and loudly recapitulate the Gospel of Jesus Christ as *theologia revelata*, professing *sola gratia* throughout his confrontation against all different kinds of *theologia naturalis*, including human self-satisfaction in their culture and civilisation. This is the *raison d’être* of Barth’s consistent attitude towards natural theology over the years.

Having considered Barth’s negative attitude towards natural theology, human efforts in search of God, which in fact does not deny God’s capacity for making Himself knowable to humans through nature, we shall now turn to explore in more detail what Barth regards as the *constant centre* of the knowledge of God, in Chapter Two. This chapter argues against the allegation that Barth at last compromises with natural theology after the wars.

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<sup>201</sup> Henry Chavannes, *The Analogy between God and the World in Saint Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, trans. William Lumley (New York: Vantage Press, 1992), 198.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 143.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHRIST AS THE CENTRE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

After announcing the illegitimacy and censuring the arbitrariness of natural theology Barth proposes an alternative starting point for Christian knowledge of God, which is nothing but Christ. From that moment on until the end of his life, Christ, and nothing else, has been the centre of Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God. In his entire life he had never changed his mind in believing that Jesus Christ is *the* key to the knowledge of God. It is thus the main task of this chapter to demonstrate this and at the same time argue against those who contend otherwise.

The two most popular labels attached to Barth's theology are 'neo-orthodoxy' and (less well-noticed) 'fideism'.<sup>1</sup> When interpreted deprecatingly by his foes, the former 'usually connotes a theology that resorts to the dogmatic reassertion of biblical revelation with little regard for cultural context',<sup>2</sup> while the latter indicates that religious truth rests exclusively with faith 'without bridges to the public areas of human knowledge and truth.'<sup>3</sup> Therefore Barth's theological position is regarded as something which 'spells only mysticism and chaotic subjectivity.'<sup>4</sup> Criticisms like these commonly accuse Barth, both implicitly and explicitly, of doing theology (admittedly believed to be faith reflection) irrespective of the reality of human life situation,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., for example, Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 11th printing (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1997), 47-64.

<sup>2</sup> William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundation of Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 192, n. 5. Cf. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices*, 42-43, n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 192, n. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 133, cited by Gregory G. Bolich, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 79.

such as cultural and social context. The following critique by Song is a typical one as he remarks:

A theology, even that of Karl Barth, that does not address itself to a living human situation remains a theoretical theology. It is a classroom theology.... This kind of theology, may delight the head, but it neither pinches the soul nor pricks the heart.... This kind of theology always begins with a doctrine about God, *not* with God and humankind.... It also emphasises the other-worldliness of the Christian faith and deemphasises practice of this-worldliness of that faith. This is a disembodied theology, to say the least--a theology that is out of focus, a theology that takes the easy road.<sup>5</sup>

There is a lack of dissection of the *matter* of Barth's works as a whole which is in character with the social context of his time, i.e., what he writes is firmly related to his *in propria persona* engagement with the Nazis and the German-Christians. Critique like Song's then becomes a bias mainly based on the *form* of Barth's early works, particularly his 'radical' and 'one-sided' commentary on *Romans*,<sup>6</sup> in which sinful humanity was an antithesis against grace; the theological emphasis was placed on the 'incomprehensible fact that God is well pleased with a man, and that a man can rejoice in God.' It is the divine grace which is 'the gift of Christ, who exposes the gulf which separates God and man, and by exposing it, bridges it.'<sup>7</sup> Barth argues that human beings are so sinful that apart from the grace of Christ 'God cannot be attained by human reason'. In fact 'human reason often hinders...the knowledge of God.'<sup>8</sup> Since all humankind are sinners 'who are not just a little, but totally guilty, hopelessly indebted and lost not only in time, but in eternity'<sup>9</sup> 'neither evidence

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<sup>5</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Tell Us Our Names--Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian* (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1968), 138.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, trans. Marguerite Wieser (London: SCM Press, 1961), 37.

nor reason is the basis for one's commitment to God'.<sup>10</sup> As a result 'no one guarantees us where they will finally lead.'<sup>11</sup> Moreover, since culture and natural science belong to sinful humankind's rational activities, they had never been mentioned independently and were usually dealt with negatively as opposition to God's grace in the early Barth.

However, since 1956 when his lecture on *The Humanity of God* was published, Barth has shown the reader that he becomes more and more 'tranquil, peaceful, universal-minded',<sup>12</sup> and aware of the fact that 'his earlier stress on Divine Sovereignty had tended to eclipse the very real sense in which God shared our humanity in the Incarnation.'<sup>13</sup> He realises that in Christ 'there is no isolation of man from God or of God from man. Rather, in Him we encounter the history, the dialogue, in which God and man meet together'.<sup>14</sup> From that realisation onwards, Barth has taken seriously and positively others' criticism in response to the post-war socio-political context, so that in Barth's theology, human knowledge in its broad sense including culture, nature, and the world in which they function, becomes more and more explicitly like the *media* of, rather than obstruction to, God's *self-revealing* to human beings.<sup>15</sup>

Barth begins to acknowledge the truth that aside from Jesus Christ, God is *capable to make* and in fact *has made* use of human knowledge as an agent of our knowledge of Himself. That is to say, nonetheless, '*God is possessed with*

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<sup>10</sup> Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *God's Search for Man*, trans. George W. Richards, Elmer G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1935), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Mehta, *The New Theologian*, 138.

<sup>13</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth,' 15.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Humanity of God' in *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas, (London: Collins Publisher, 1961), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 37.

*the capacity to reveal Himself by virtue of nature, but not vice versa*'.<sup>16</sup> This conviction is expanded and reinforced in the subsection on 'the Light of Life' in volume four of the *Church Dogmatics*. One of the reasons why a number of Barth's critics fail to do justice to his positive valuation of human knowledge in the 'many-sided' *Dogmatics* is not merely because 'the commentary on Romans is a radical work', but also, and above all, because they do not 'take the trouble to read twelve volumes.'<sup>17</sup>

This *formal*, but *not* material, modification of his theology is Barth's positive response to his critics so as to be in line with the post-war socio-political context. This chapter thus is aimed to sketch how Barth's later theological efforts counteract the pejoratively used 'neo-orthodoxy' and 'fideism' which go awry and fail to do justice to his theology by and large.

## **I. The New Humanity Actualised in Christ**

In the light of the greatest apostle, Paul, in the New Testament Barth, in his early theological thought, realised that sin has fiercely dominated the world since the Fall; all human existence is conditioned by it and its very outcome is death which clearly discloses the broken relationship between God and human beings.<sup>18</sup> Inhabiting the world of death, all humankind is controlled by sin insofar as '[s]in is power--sovereign power' that distorts humanity and should never be ignored or overlooked.<sup>19</sup> Barth says, sin stems its sovereign power from a peculiar relationship of the human to God. At worst, 'sin is a robbing of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mehta, *The New Theologian*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> Bolich, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 167.



God, a robbery which becomes apparent in our arrogant endeavour' to overcome the destiny of human mortality, as well as

in their drunken blurring of the distance which separates them from God, in their forgetfulness of His invisibility, in their investing of human beings with the form of God, and of God with the form of human beings, and in their devotion to some romantic infinity, some 'No-God' of this world, which they have created for themselves.<sup>20</sup>

More often than not human beings are negligent of the fact that they must die 'in *ungodliness and unrighteousness*.' On that account, in its visible and concrete form, 'sin is the disturbing of the relationship with God which is defined by death.'<sup>21</sup>

Under the destructive domination of sin, human beings will be restrained within their continued disobedience to God which causes a 'corresponding loss of freedom and authentic selfhood.'<sup>22</sup> Later, Barth comes to acknowledge that it is exactly for this special reason that God bestows His saving grace--His claim on and over human beings--in order to restore the covenant broken by sinful humankind. This is God's purpose of reconciling the world unto Himself in His Son's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection; His continuing work through the Holy Spirit effects reconciliation between degenerated humanity and God and thus fulfils the broken covenant between them.<sup>23</sup> Hence human beings, in accordance with Barth's doctrine of creation, remain an 'object of divine grace', and this truth can *only* become comprehensible to them by the Word of God in

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth*, 215; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 459; 498ff.; IV/2, 459-460.

<sup>23</sup> David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth, Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, ed. Bob E. Patterson, 4th printing (Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1976), 121.

which they are grounded.<sup>24</sup> Barth argues:

The attitude of God in which the faithfulness of the Creator and therefore the unchanging relationships of the human being created by Him are revealed and knowable, is quite simply His attitude and relation to the man Jesus.... He is God as even in His eternal Godhead He became this man in His human creatureliness. This is God's attitude towards sinful man.... In God's attitude to this man [Jesus] the decision is made that *the divine grace is primary and the sin of man secondary, and that the primary factor is more powerful than the secondary.*<sup>25</sup>

This line of thought is encapsulated in his interpretation of the relationship between Christ and Adam in Romans 5 where Barth argues: '*Our relationship to Christ has an essential priority and superiority over our relationship to Adam.*'<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, in *The Humanity of God*, Barth intends to make a '*change of direction*' from his earlier emphasis on the '*deity*' of God -- 'a God absolutely unique in His relation to man and the world, overpoweringly lofty and distant, strange,...even wholly other'--inclined to overshadow the very real sense in which God assumed humanity in the incarnation.<sup>27</sup> However, the change, Barth argues, is 'not in opposition to but none the less in *distinction* from'<sup>28</sup> the earlier point and is aimed to stress 'God's *togetherness* with man' in Jesus Christ<sup>29</sup> Barth defines the humanity of God as 'God's relation to and turning towards man'<sup>30</sup> by way of 'His free affirmation of man, His free concern for him, His

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<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 31. In addition, going through the doctrine of election, Barth maintains: 'It is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.... Its function is to bear basic testimony to eternal, free and unchanged grace as the beginning of all the ways and works of God' (*Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 3). 'In so far as God not only is love, but loves, in the act of love which determines His whole being God elects' (76). Cf. Colin Gunton, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election as Part of His Doctrine of God,' *Journal of Theological Studies*, 25.2 (1974), 381-392; Mary Kathleen Cunningham, *What is Theological Exegesis?: Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 41 [italics mine].

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Christ and Adam*, 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 37.

free substitution for him'.<sup>31</sup> For in His divinely free discretion and election and sovereign decision God is *human*. He does not despise human beings, but in an inconceivable manner esteems them highly just as they are, takes them into His heart and sets Himself in their place.<sup>32</sup>

With Barth the humanity of human beings in both its 'vertical and horizontal relationships' is something "'reflected in the mirror of Jesus Christ--of the one who exists for everyone else'".<sup>33</sup> The *true* humanity, in other words, is and can only be 'personified in the life of the Son, in His obedience to the Father's will and in His service for others, and through His death actual human sinful nature is reconstituted to its *status quo* antecedent to the Fall'.<sup>34</sup> That is to say and rightly speaking, 'it is at heart transformed into a new nature *in toto*'.<sup>35</sup> At this stage either the terms 'new humanity' or 'true human nature' are used reciprocally in a *Soteriological* sense to amplify his *Christocentric* proposition that God reveals Himself through Himself; this concept is further developed by Barth in solidifying the significance of revelation in terms of *reconciliation*.<sup>36</sup> In terms of *Aufhebung*, humanity is affirmed in God's creation, negated in human degeneration, and reconstituted in Christ's reconciliation. To put it more precisely, in God's loving act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, there is both a divine 'presupposition' and a gracious 'consequence'. From one perspective, what happens in Jesus Christ is a *humiliation of God*, while from another perspective, however, the happening at

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Against the Stream*, 188.

<sup>34</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth,' 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See his definition of the scope of the doctrine of reconciliation in *Church Dogmatics*, VI/1, 3.

once is the *exaltation of humanity* accomplished in Jesus Christ. The humiliation is the presupposition, whereas the exaltation is the consequence.<sup>37</sup> This is the greatest ‘reversal of roles between divinity and humanity that effectuates the new situation; reconciliation’.<sup>38</sup> By the reversal, in which the innocent one is judged as guilty one, and which results in the elevation of sinful humanity, the Lord not merely discloses the human race the ‘condescending grace of God but also accomplishes the elevated form of a new humanity.’<sup>39</sup>

Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation is in essence the expansion of the proposition of the doctrine of creation that determines his entire theology: the human is ‘the object of the merciful will of God’.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, not until Barth enters into the meanings of the ‘light of life’ does his concept of the objective revelation reach its climax, in which the sinful human understanding of the universe is reconciled by the humanity of Christ as a portion of the ‘little lights’ or ‘other words’ serving as *possibilities of knowing God outside of Jesus Christ*.<sup>41</sup> Such ‘little lights’ are, however, still *within* the sphere of divine grace in which Jesus too was a human being<sup>42</sup> and in the sphere of the subjective revelation that motivates faith, owing to the fact that they ‘do not reveal God to

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 102-103.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 109

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>40</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 34. Cf. Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 59-98.

<sup>41</sup> However, one must become aware of the considerable fact that Barth’s theology of reconciliation does not exist *in vacuo*, rather does it appear to be in inseparable connection with creation as its major ‘presupposition’ and with redemption as its ‘consequence’. Creation ‘is to a certain extent the source’, while redemption is ‘the goal of our path.’ Yet reconciliation ‘is the Way upon which we find ourselves in faith. From that vantage we may review the entire fullness of the acts of God’ (*Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson [London: SCM Press, 1972], 71). Cf. *The Christian Life--Church Dogmatics*, IV/4 (lecture fragments), 168; Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 69-149.

<sup>42</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 277.

the unregenerate mind' and therefore must be 'viewed by the eyes of faith.'<sup>43</sup>

In other words, the *noetic* consequences of human knowledge of God apart from Jesus Christ are *ontologically* determined by the Word of God.<sup>44</sup> Within the context of the contention of Jesus the Word of God being the 'light of life', Barth speaks about the possibility of there existing 'other lights' and 'other words'--the capacity of Jesus in creating human witnesses to His truth could not be restricted merely within the line of demarcation of the Christian community.<sup>45</sup> 'We may thus expect', Barth writes,

and count upon it, that even among those who are outside this sphere and its particular orders and conditions He will use His capacity to make of men, quite apart from and even in face of their own knowledge or volition, something which they could never be of themselves, namely, His witnesses, speaking words which can seriously be called true.<sup>46</sup>

The emphasis is again laid upon the 'new humanity' in the reconciliation of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ who will come again to renew all things. Barth regards it as the 'third dimension' with which he devastatingly concerns himself over and above what many theologians may cogitate primarily in terms of two dimensions in reference to, for example, God and human beings, eternity and contingency. This is the 'evangelical heart of Barth's theology', 'the doctrine of Christ as the divine Reconciler', which concurs with his doctrine of God because Jesus Christ the Son 'is the place where we know the *Father*.'<sup>47</sup> In the new humanity God approaches human beings in love and unites Himself with them in Christ regardless of their sin and sinfulness; thus, the relevance of

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<sup>43</sup> Hart, 'A Capacity for Ambiguity?', 296, n. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 277.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., VI/3, 113ff.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>47</sup> T. F. Torrance, 'Karl Barth,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 22.1 (1969), 4.

the Christ's humanity is for every aspect of human life.<sup>48</sup> As T. F. Torrance points out, in this sense Jesus *reveals* himself as a real human being, and 'through His life and death makes reconciliation possible in revelation for all to *share* this humanity in a life of faith and obedience.'<sup>49</sup> As a consequence, the sovereignty and freedom of God are highlighted in Barth's doctrine of reconciliation as revelation, even to the extent that God becomes a human being, for all human beings and their redemption.<sup>50</sup> Whereas the crevasse at that point is bridged, a 'hiatus remains between our true humanity (possessed by Jesus of Nazareth) and our actual humanity,' which can only be bridged by the cross and the empty tomb where 'our actual humanity is elevated or transformed.'<sup>51</sup>

'Jesus Christ', according to the first article of the Barmen Theological Declaration, 'as He is attested to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.'<sup>52</sup> Any doctrine assuming that one 'can and must recognise as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside this one Word of God' must be renounced as false.<sup>53</sup> What does it mean to confess that Jesus Christ is 'the one Word of God'? The answer may be made in accordance with the apparatus of a 'deceptively simple' differentiation.<sup>54</sup> When one comes to recognise Jesus Christ as the only one Word of God, event is differentiated from word, history from testimony, and life from light. The dimensions of event, history, and life are conferred an abstruse supremacy over

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>49</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth,' 17.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>52</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 172.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

those of word, testimony, and light, albeit they are claimed to be bound together in ‘indissoluble’ and ‘differentiated unity’.<sup>55</sup> The appearance of *reconciliation* is an occurrence of the event, history, and life of Jesus Christ, whereas the appearance of *revelation* is an occurrence of His word, testimony, and life. Both appearances are actually one in Him, and He Himself is the *agent* of each individual. For in revelation reconciliation has been made and accomplished.<sup>56</sup>

Hence Barth argues that ‘there is no alternative’; reconciliation and revelation must be considered together constantly. For him, reconciliation as revelation is first and decisively event and reality in the God who is its Mediator and Accomplisher in His own person. ‘As the reconciliation is His work, so is its revelation, in its past and present and future occurrence. As the reconciliation takes place in Him, its revelation takes place through Him. It does not take place, and therefore cannot be seen or understood, apart from Him or in any way in itself.’<sup>57</sup>

That is to say, reconciliation does not and cannot take place on its own ground without concurrently possessing the character of revelation because of the fact that ‘Jesus Christ lives as a person with a particular history’.<sup>58</sup> This statement has a *twofold accentuation*: on the one hand, Jesus Christ lives as person *with a unique history*, and on the other hand, Jesus Christ *lives as a person with a unique history*.<sup>59</sup> Without the unique history He ‘would not and could not be the Reconciler’; without being a person in the way that He lives He

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<sup>55</sup> Barth, *God in Action*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 38-39.

<sup>58</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 236.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

‘would not and could be the Revealer.’<sup>60</sup> In revelation ‘God reveals Himself as “God” where He shows Himself as the same and is thus known as the same. He becomes identifiable where He identifies Himself with Himself in the historic act of His faithfulness’ in reconciliation.<sup>61</sup> The history in which Jesus Christ lives, ‘conceived as the occurrence of reconciliation, can also be revelation, precisely because He is uniquely the one who lives’.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that in revelation ‘Jesus Christ lives’ as the ‘Mediator and Accomplisher’ of the reconciliation of God to human beings is of drastic importance, paving the way to Barth’s crucial notion in this subsection that Jesus is the ‘Light of life’ in relation to other lights. ‘As Jesus Christ lives’, explicates Barth, ‘there takes place in Him both creative actualisation of being, yet also in and with creaturely actualisation; creative and creaturely life together, without the transformation of the one into other, the admixture of the one with the other, or separation or division between.’<sup>63</sup> As the divine-human Reconciler He does not only live ‘in the manner of God’ in unconditional freedom and power, but also ‘in the manner of man’ in the freedom and power divinely determined and limited ‘in the natural and historical nexus of the created world.’<sup>64</sup> He lives as the Subject of salvation history which concludes and includes all other histories. Only in the life of Jesus the divine-human who is ‘prior to all that exists, not grounded on any other, referred to no other existence or support’<sup>65</sup> has the reconciliation, the ‘union between God and each

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 116.

<sup>62</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 236.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 40.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



of us men', been accomplished.<sup>66</sup>

The life of Jesus Christ thus lightens His reconciling work in the world. In Barth's word, Jesus Christ is *the* light of life, obviously, so as not to falsify His adequate relationship to all other lights. The definite article purports the exclusiveness in two aspects that positively 'He is the light in all its fullness, in perfect adequacy'; and that negatively 'there is no other light of life outside or alongside...the light which He is.'<sup>67</sup> With humankind as a whole, Jesus Christ who 'embraces both the *gloria* of God and the human *glorificatio*' is 'wholly and utterly in the fulfilment of His life-act' the light of life.<sup>68</sup> For the individual to regard Jesus Christ as the one and only light of life is the *freedom* to confess: 'Thou hast the words of eternal life, Thou alone and no other (for there are no other to whom we may go),...so that I have no option but to hear these words from Thee.'<sup>69</sup> The light (truth) of Jesus Christ is surely peerless in character which cannot be inclusively merged in, or even intermixed with, other relatively unregimented truths, nor can it be positioned in a series of truths as though it were simply one alongside many others.

The confession of Jesus Christ as the one and only light is precisely a 'Christological statement'. Nevertheless it has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with an 'arbitrary exaltation and self-glorification of the Christian in relation to others, of the Church in relation to other institutions, or of Christianity in relation to other concepts'.<sup>70</sup> It is rather a concern amenable to the authority of the One who declares Himself through it, because the Church 'has not found or

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 87-88; 90.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 90.

fashioned for itself this statement which its witness declares',<sup>71</sup> and because the Church has never jeopardised this statement on its own authority, but only by adhering to that of the biblical witness.<sup>72</sup> This is the responsibility, or better the freedom, of Christians 'first learned quite simply from the biblical witness' that allows no hazard of 'exposing ourselves to the reproach of arrogant prejudice.'<sup>73</sup> As such, 'much Christian anxiety in the face of this reproach would disappear of itself...if we remembered that as Christians we are not summoned or committed to thinking and speaking on our own authority and responsibility, but kept modestly yet steadfastly to the direction of Holy Scripture.'<sup>74</sup> It will never, then, necessitate any elevation of Christians and the Church over or adverse to non-Christians and their organisations, yet rather it will be an inextricable ligament between them insofar as the Christological statement confronts Christians and non-Christians alike with 'the one truth superior' to them both. Inconsistent with Calvin, Barth does not regard the Church as 'mother of believers' which gives birth to the Christian and his or her life of faith,<sup>75</sup> but as 'the earthen vessel in which faith shines.'<sup>76</sup>

What distinguishes the Church from the non-Christian institution is that 'the former knows of its salvation', while the latter 'still awaits the revelation of the work of reconciliation and redemption perfected in Jesus Christ.'<sup>77</sup> 'As Jesus Christ is its content, the one who confesses it in no sense marks himself off

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>75</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. II, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1016.

<sup>76</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus is Victor!: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 84.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

from those who do not. In face of what it says, not concerning Christian or the Church or Christianity, but concerning Christ, he [non-Christian] is in solidarity with them [Christians].'<sup>78</sup> But in no circumstances does it, by contrast, hint that the prophecy of the Christian and Church has been relativised and replaced by the many other prophecies, lights and words. 'It cannot, then, be legitimately advanced and stated except as the men who live in this sphere [the Church] submit themselves first, with all their Christian views and concepts, dogmas and institutions, customs, traditions and innovations, to the relativisation and criticism which come through Jesus Christ as the one light of life.'<sup>79</sup>

In a like manner Barth maintains that Jesus Christ is *the one and only* Word of God, that He alone shares the uniqueness of God'.<sup>80</sup> The 'one Word of God is related to 'other words' in Holy Scripture and the Church because, as tokens of the former, the latter witnesses to the real Word who proclaims Himself in them in the form of doctrines, traditions, instructions, and worship, in addition to preaching, as their sovereign source and criterion.<sup>81</sup> Two dimensions of witness must be distinguished: 'There is *direct* witness to Jesus Christ in the words of the prophets and apostles.'<sup>82</sup> In Holy Scripture Jesus Christ proclaims Himself to be the one Word of God, but Scripture of itself is not identical with the one Word of God.<sup>83</sup> '*Indirect* witness is also borne to Jesus Christ in the message, activity and life of the Christian Church, whose whole

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<sup>78</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 91.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 91, 96.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

*raison d'être* is to make Him known as the one Word of God.<sup>84</sup>

The one Word thus diverges from and at the same time 'delimits all other words, lights, revelations, prophecies and apostolates'.<sup>85</sup> Yet He is also the One in whom all other words in Scripture, in the doctrine, instruction, worship and whole existence of the Church, and even secular words, converge. Although, according to Barth, Jesus Christ is not the only word, nor is He the only true word, He is indeed the only Word of itself and in itself declared with divine authority and power. Hence 'we have every cause to keep to the belief that He is faithful, and that in Jesus Christ, we have His total and unique and therefore authentic revelation, the Word in which He does full justice both to Himself and us.'<sup>86</sup>

Inasmuch as the truth of Jesus Christ cannot be adjunct or alternate to human words on the strength of a superior conceptual scheme, He retains the freedom and capability to enter 'into the closest conjunction with' other words. Jesus Christ 'has actually entered into a union of this kind with the biblical prophets and apostles, and it is the prayer and promise in and by which His community exists that He will not refuse but be willing to enter into a similar union with it. Nor can any prevent Him entering into such a union with those who are outside the sphere of the Bible and the Church.'<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Jesus Christ has gathered and called all humans, in the first place the twelve disciples, 'out of sin and into the freedom of new life--in the power of the accomplished

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. [italics mine]

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 97; cf. 98-115; 122-124.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 10.

reconciliation.’<sup>88</sup>

It is, however, to be noted that this type of union, whether in the Church or the World, cannot be legitimate and meaningfully fruitful. Rather it rests *au grand sérieux* with the ‘concrete content’ of the one Word--the singular existence of the life and work of Jesus, in the form of His free revelation of grace consisting of simultaneous divinity and humanity ‘within human history and among the many histories of all others’, in which God abases Himself so as to emancipate and exalt sinful humanity.<sup>89</sup> ‘It is the life in which God gives Himself up to death and man is made the conqueror of death.... It is the life of reconciliation. It is the life of Jesus Christ.’<sup>90</sup>

The life of Jesus Christ ‘in itself and as such is Word, revelation, *kerygma*.’ This life in which the reconciliation is consummated was and is lived ‘*pro nobis*’, i.e. ‘*pro te et me*’, whose ultimatum is ‘*Dominus nobiscum*’.<sup>91</sup> It purports that as human beings *we* are justified and sanctified for the kingdom of God; *our* defiled old life is ‘displaced removed, destroyed and radically transformed in it’, and we have entered into new and eternal life in this life.<sup>92</sup> In comparison with the concrete content of the one Word, what other words express are but ‘a mass of rudiments and fragments which in their isolation and absoluteness say something very different from this Word.’<sup>93</sup> Words from elsewhere may indeed utter things of goodness, illumination, and benefit, whereas this Word as such takes place nowhere else, precisely on account of the fact that unlike ‘human

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<sup>88</sup> David E. Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), x.

<sup>89</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 105.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 108.

history and the many histories of all others', it is a particular and unrepeatable history.

## II. Secular Words as Witnesses to the One Word

Apart from the one Word, true words 'of great seriousness, profound comfort, and supreme wisdom'<sup>94</sup> are not only confined in 'the narrow corner' in the witness of Holy Scripture and in the life of the Christian Church, but can also be found '*extra muros ecclesiae*' or *in partibus infidelium*. Although the words *extra muros ecclesiae* are not identical with the Word, it remains the case that 'even in their whole creatureliness and human frailty [they] either are or may be true words, and are not to be overlooked, let alone rejected.'<sup>95</sup> They can become true 'words of genuine prophecy' only when they comply 'in the closest material and substantial conformity and agreement with the Word of God Himself' as well as 'with that of His one Prophet Jesus Christ.'<sup>96</sup>

These words in conformity and agreement with the one Word of God are rendered by Barth as 'parabolai, of the basileia'. In their capacity, entitled by grace, as 'secondary forms' of the Word, the stories that Jesus Christ narrated are 'no more metaphor but a disclosing yet also concealing revelation, self-representation and self-offering of the kingdom and the life, and therefore His own self-revelation.'<sup>97</sup> They are transformed into 'what they were not before, and what they cannot be in and of themselves'--servants of and testimonies to the real presence of the kingdom of God. These words, therefore,

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 112.

can function properly ‘only in the presence of *grace*.’<sup>98</sup> They indeed, like the New Testament parables as their ‘prototype’, become ‘true words alongside the one Word of God, created and determined by it, exactly corresponding to it, fully serving it and therefore enjoying its power and authority.’<sup>99</sup> The content of these worldly parables ‘in material agreement with’ the one Word is to ‘illuminate, accentuate or explain the biblical witness in a particular time and situation, thus confirming it in the deepest sense by helping to make it sure and concretely evident and certain.’<sup>100</sup> Their mission is, by any means, to ‘lead the community more truly and profoundly than ever before to Scripture.’<sup>101</sup>

A question, entailed by the discussion of ‘the two secondary forms’ of the Word, emerges here: ‘[A]re there really such true words spoken in the secular world and addressed to the community from it? How can we count on it?’<sup>102</sup> The ‘only one decisive answer’ that Barth gives, which dominates the core of his somewhat universal understanding of reconciliation (and salvation), is the suffering, death, and resurrection of the humiliated and exalted Christ on behalf of and for the sake of all.<sup>103</sup>

Therefore in the light of, and by virtue of, what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ, Christians ‘can and must be prepared to encounter “parables of the kingdom” in the full biblical sense, *not merely in the witness of the Bible and the various arrangements, works and words of the Christian Church, but also in the secular sphere*, i.e., in the strange interruption of the secularism of life in the

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<sup>98</sup> Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 183.

<sup>99</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 113.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

world.’<sup>104</sup> Although Christ ‘alone...is alone *the* light, He chooses others to be a corresponding light.’<sup>105</sup> Barth is convinced that as the sheep have ears to hear and distinguish the voice of the good shepherd from other clamant voices, even in the wilderness, so too as Christians hear the voice of the Lord, they will not move out of the circle and ministry of His Word, but place themselves the more definitely and deeply within it in order to be ‘the better and more attentive and more convincing servants of this Word.’<sup>106</sup>

In perception of the ‘true words from without’, secular parables ‘have no need to appeal either for basis or content to the sorry hypothesis of a so-called “natural theology”.’<sup>107</sup> They do not concede to ‘a knowledge of God given in and with the natural force of reason or to be attained in its exercise’.<sup>108</sup> Instead of ‘the self-impartation of the God who acts as Father in the Son by the Holy Ghost’, what interests natural theology is ‘abstract impartations concerning God’s existence as the Supreme Being and Ruler of all things, and human responsibility towards Him’.<sup>109</sup> No one as such can ever approach God by objectifying Him with innate human capacity; granted that ‘there are true words for knowing God, it is all miraculous.’<sup>110</sup>

As far as the essential competency of being true words is concerned, secular parables are distributed into two configurations of secularism, one of which is ‘pure and absolute’, whereas the other is ‘mixed and relative’.<sup>111</sup> They

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 117 [italics mine].

<sup>105</sup> Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth*, ix.

<sup>106</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 117.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.



are distinguished on the ground of their proximity to the 'sphere of the Bible and the Church'; the former 'stands furthest from' it, while the latter stands 'closer to' it.<sup>112</sup> On the one hand, the people in the sphere of pure and absolute secularism within which the Gospel has never, or only very inadequately, reached them, are those who 'stand unwittingly in full isolation from the Gospel in its biblical and churchly form', and who will react antagonistically to the Gospel when it does reach them. Such people are not only to be found in 'so-called heathen territories...but also in the greatest proximity to the Christian Churches--a proximity which may contain within itself the greatest inward distance.'<sup>113</sup> In other words, even within Christendom there are people, as many as there are outside it, who pertain 'sociologically, by name and baptism, but do not belong at all in practice, being blind and deaf heathen.'<sup>114</sup>

They are certainly no longer attached to the one Word of God, but stubbornly boast of their own autonomy. It would be a mistake to come to a conclusion too quickly that this results in deprivation of the 'sovereignty of Jesus Christ and the power of His prophecy', so that genuine words are excluded from human lips in this sphere none the less.<sup>115</sup> Human beings must always bear in mind that, although they may deny God, pursuant to the reconciling Word of God will never reject them.<sup>116</sup> Human beings may be inimical to the Gospel of God, but the Gospel remains admissible to them. This signifies that 'in the world reconciled by God in Jesus Christ there is no secular sphere abandoned by Him or withdrawn from His control, even where from the human standpoint it seems

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

to approximate most dangerously to the pure and absolute form of utter godlessness.’<sup>117</sup> Even from what ‘seem to be the darkest places’ human beings will surely be prepared constantly and firmly for true words ‘in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ’.<sup>118</sup> Secularism in its pure and absolute form, for that reason, is not indispensably a complete disadvantage to the occurrence of theologically *bona fide* words, ‘if Christians refrain from the hostile inflexible attitude towards it’.<sup>119</sup>

On the other hand, secularism in its mixed and relative form is ‘closer to the sphere of the Bible and the Church, and encompasses the people who have been affected in some measure by the Gospel in its biblical and churchly form’.<sup>120</sup> The people within it, to varying degrees, either sincerely or insincerely accept the Gospel, or at least do not renounce it, by its exercise of influence and determination.<sup>121</sup> Their life on the whole, nevertheless, evinces no apparent connection with the pivotal substance of the Gospel; rather, it represents a dissimilar milieu ‘resting upon and impelled by its laws and tendencies’ as they are ‘only in name and appearance and external allegiance related to the Gospel’.<sup>122</sup> Although this equivocal sphere is within a stone’s throw of Scripture and the Church, and it is ostensibly much more ‘likely, possible and readily’ to be anticipated that human words will be ‘parables of the kingdom’ which attest the one Word of God, ‘yet it has more potential for

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 120.

dangerous obstruction to the Gospel than does pure secularism'.<sup>123</sup>

What worries Barth is that, in such a pluralistic and relativistic world, the sovereign and miraculous grace of God upon the human through Jesus Christ is equivalently at hazard as it is in the 'unequivocal secularism of militant godlessness'.<sup>124</sup> 'Yet', says Barth, 'all these obvious fears must not result in a basic lack of confidence in the power of the message, however well or badly delivered.'<sup>125</sup> For no matter how 'poor and wretched and strange they may be', in His mercy God allows an inwardly and spiritually, rather than an externally and technically, distinctive situation in which 'the community and Christianity are found at the heart of secularism'.<sup>126</sup> In *fides quaerens intellectum* the secular parables of the kingdom become *en bloc* an 'echo or positive answer to the speech of Jesus Christ attested by the ministry of the Christian community.'<sup>127</sup> Barth ascribes the possibility of their existence on a secular basis to Jesus' reconciling work for the world as the attestation of God's self-impartation accredited by its agreement with the biblical witness accepted in the Church.<sup>128</sup>

We are summoned to believe in Him, and in His victorious power, not in the invincibility of any non-Christian, anti-Christian or pseudo-Christian worldliness which confronts Him. *The more seriously and joyfully we believe in Him, the more we shall see such signs in the worldly sphere, and the more we shall be able to receive true words from it.*<sup>129</sup>

In order to underline his assertion, Barth compares Jesus to the 'centre of a circle' and also to 'the whole of the periphery constituted by it', while all other

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. [italics mine].

words are merely segments of the circle pointing to the whole of its periphery.<sup>130</sup> As centre and periphery can never exist independent of each other, so the unity of the truth of the one Word at the centre and that of the words at the periphery are considered as indissoluble as two dimensions of a single truth. In Barth's eschatological consideration, true secular words can exist only *ad interim* in their indirect, individual and tentative *status in quo* as nothing other than 'signs of [Christ's] lordship or attestation of His prophecy' until His Advent in 'the direct and universal and definitive revelation of His glory'.<sup>131</sup> Hence true words from the secular realm 'do not express partial truths, for the one truth of Jesus Christ is indivisible.'<sup>132</sup> 'Yet', he goes on,

they express the one and total from a particular angle, and to that extent only implicitly and not explicitly in its unity and totality.... They are true words only as they refer back to their origin in the one Word, i.e., as the one true Word Jesus Christ Himself, declares Himself in them.<sup>133</sup>

That is to say, all human words are always unable to outgrow the true Word and 'can be true only as genuine witnesses and attestations to the one Word of God'.<sup>134</sup> Whenever they are uttered and accepted partially, they can never be true words as such, insofar as 'they are true words in their presupposed and implied, if not always immediately apparent, connexion with the totality of Jesus Christ and His prophecy, and therefore as they indirectly point to this, or as this indirectly declares itself in them.'<sup>135</sup> With this centre-and-periphery analogy, Hunsinger points out, Barth's exposition of the relationship between the one

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 123

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Light (or Word) and other lights (or secular words) has reached its zenith.<sup>136</sup> In respect to the query concerning how those secular words found outside the Scriptures and the Christian community can be discerned as truths rather than the results of natural theology, Barth again propounds four chief criteria *based on faith*: ‘formal, material, practical and ecclesiastical.’<sup>137</sup> In other words, they are the criteria of Scripture and the confession of the Church, their consequences, and their influences on the community. Examination of those words is in order to ‘distinguish them from other words which do not derive from the light which lightens the darkness,...[and] can only be regarded as untrue words.’<sup>138</sup>

Since Holy Scripture is the primary authority by which the one true Word is known to the world, other words must first of all be examined *in re* their ‘agreement with the witness of Scripture.’<sup>139</sup> They are counted as true words insofar as their messages ‘harmonise at some point with the whole context of the biblical message as centrally determined and characterised by Jesus Christ’,<sup>140</sup> for the biblical witness can be substituted by no true word at any rate. A true word thus is at best a ‘good and authentic commentary’ probing into the word of the Bible that will not divert its hearers from Scripture, but move them more deeply into it.<sup>141</sup> To this extent the words are no doubt qualified as true words, and thus human beings ought to be confidently ready and obedient ‘not to the words as such, but to the word of Scripture illuminated and made more

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<sup>136</sup> Hunsinger suggests that the content of the complicated relationship between the two parties can be elucidated more distinctly in terms of certain Tillichian categories--autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy (*How to Read Karl Barth*, 262-264.).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>138</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, VI/3, 126.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

pressingly by them.’<sup>142</sup> These other words, in turn, need to be proved true by being tested by the ‘secondary authority’ in the form of the dogmas and confessions of the Church in continuity with the ‘insights of preceding fathers and brethren.’<sup>143</sup> Barth considers it the microcosm and genuine meaning of the ‘*communio sanctorum* of all ages’ in obedience to the one Lord.<sup>144</sup>

The third and the last gauge for the test of secular words surrounding the community is an outcome showing a ‘positive relationship between the words...and the one Word of truth.’ An outcome in keeping with what the genuine word of the Scriptures mean that the Church will be possessed of ‘the character of affirmation and criticism, of address and claim, of a summons to faith and a call to repentance...which affirms and strengthens and upbuilds’ the Church.<sup>145</sup> Barth argues that the call for the *insiders* to repentance ‘whether from within [the community] or from without’. As long as it is true, may be recognised by the fact that the formidable yet instructive censure, challenge, and criticism are ‘those of the Gospel by which the community is always raised up as well as cast down, not being plunged into a sterile melancholy, remorse and abasement, but stirred with new resolution and clarity to represent its good cause.’<sup>146</sup> Hence, words which criticise the Church are qualified to be true only if they are words by which the community is comforted. Their authenticity can be recognised, Barth concludes, ‘by the fact that it concerns and activates Christians as Christians and the community as the community in this twofold

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 129.

sense.’<sup>147</sup>

Having come to grips with the preceding criteria, Barth goes on to take into account last but not least the following question: How are these secular words to be used most precisely by the Christian community in relation to the Scripture so as to be part of the knowledge of God? Both general and specific answers are given. The *general* answer Barth gives, on the one hand, is that in face of these secular words the community must filter out any haughtiness or sloth in order to ‘be ready to hear them’ and to ‘let them do the work laid upon them in relation to proclamation, instruction and the whole life of the community.’<sup>148</sup> If secular words are true words, says Barth, they must also be ‘free communications of the will of its Lord’.<sup>149</sup> This must not be overlooked and repudiated, but accepted, not merely as a interpretation of the Bible, ‘which is the primary and appropriate rootstock of all knowledge of the Christian life, but also as a corrective of the tradition of the Church, and as an impulse to its reformation.’<sup>150</sup> The more *specific* answer, on the other hand, is that secular words uttered and received in the history of the Church as sporadic, individual, and irregular modes are overruled, preserved, and continually reformed by Holy Scripture, not only in the constant, universal and regular ‘source and norm’, but also in an ‘abiding whole’ by which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the community is addressed and accompanied by Jesus Christ through its history.<sup>151</sup>

The aforementioned viewpoints nonetheless cannot be applied to secular words--the free communications of Jesus Christ in world events--if one wishes to

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 130-131.

‘estimate them aright.’<sup>152</sup> However recognised, authorised, and significant in the life of the community, they are but ‘the voice of certain individual events and elements’ which occurred and are demarcated in particular times and places in world history.<sup>153</sup> This means that they cannot be claimed identical with Holy Scripture, nor can they be laid alongside it as a kind of second Scripture, but only as attestation and illumination of it.<sup>154</sup> Those secular words are spoken in particular circumstances and individual contexts in which the members of the community find themselves ‘at individual points in human history which moves to its end but still endures.’<sup>155</sup> The community existing here and now, therefore, has still to hear ‘very different words’ and to learn the ‘specific and salutary effect...and experience’ from world events happening there and then for the future as directed and made ‘fruitful in and for the community’ by its Lord.<sup>156</sup> They should advance this task in such a way as demonstrates themselves ‘with a readiness to be corrected’ to have received a true word and to have been thoroughly smitten by its power and ministry to ‘bring forth its truth to animate others and to arouse recognition and confession in them’.<sup>157</sup> While it is a painstaking task, so long as it is a real *logos*, ‘the time will inevitably come sooner or later when it can make its way and do its work in and to the whole community’ in view of a true knowledge of God.<sup>158</sup>

At the point of concluding his development of the issue on secular words, Barth articulates the fact that he has ‘not adduced a single example’ to describe

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.



the distinctiveness of a genuine word of this sort.<sup>159</sup> His concern is to ‘set aside anything that might distract from [the knowledge of God] itself’ with respect to the aforethought essential questions.<sup>160</sup> [Namely, the ontological basis for the potentiality of true words from a secular sphere, the mode of coexistence of such true words with the one true Word of God, the epistemological criteria for examining these true secular words, and the proper utilisation and operation of the true words to the Christian community.] All concrete or phenomenal examples arising in this connection are ‘doubtful and contestable’ and will blur his real intention and aim. ‘What is not doubtful and contestable is the prophecy of the Lord Jesus Christ and its almighty power to bring forth such true words even *extra muros ecclesiae* and to attest itself through them.’<sup>161</sup> ‘This *alone* is the question to be considered: whether and how far words of this kind both in theory and in practice’ may be reckoned to be true.<sup>162</sup>

Barth finalises his conception of ‘the light of life’ on secular parables by making a ‘second Christological statement’ in response and supplement to the first.<sup>163</sup> Unlike the first Christological statement directly in reference to the Word, in his second statement Barth speaks of the lights or truths or words of creation as the ‘*theatrum gloriae Dei*’ that highlights the light of the only true light.<sup>164</sup> Although creation is merely the theatre and setting, the *locus* and backdrop, of His life and work in the event and revelation of reconciliation, its lights form a resplendent sphere for the light of Jesus Christ’s self-declaration;

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. Cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 271

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

although creation can not be equated with God, it is actualised by and united with Him.<sup>165</sup> By being ‘mutually related and conditioned’ Barth typifies the unity and totality of celestial and terrestrial creation in which ‘there takes place the life of Jesus Christ and therefore reconciliation, the event of salvation.’<sup>166</sup> What is being performed on the stage of the ‘*theatrum gloriae Dei*’ is the ‘self-witness of creation’ emanating from God that magnifies and glorifies Him.<sup>167</sup>

It self-testifies that the creaturely world is not only in harmony with God’s action towards human beings, but is in fact a ‘reflection of the final-declaration of their Creator in His great act and peace.’<sup>168</sup> ‘In this sense’, Barth says, ‘they are taken, lifted, assumed and integrated into the action of God’s self-giving and self-declaring to man and therefore to the world made by Him. Moreover, in the power of this integration they are instituted, installed and ordained to the *ministerium Verbi Divini*.’<sup>169</sup> In Barth’s eyes this is the trully critical but ‘positive relationship’ between the light of life and the lights of creation that has been given to human beings in the ‘eternal goodness of the God whose saving action is revealed by the one light’.<sup>170</sup> The differences of the one light from the lights of creation, consequently, are less significant than those from natural theology of all sorts. Precisely, although *natural* knowledge of God *by* the human is rejected, the *nature* by and in which God reveals Himself *to* human

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 137; 150f.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. *Psalm* 19: 1-4; Ibid., 164.

<sup>168</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 164.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 164f.

beings is welcomed.<sup>171</sup> It must be noted, however, that it is only in the context of the positive and inclusive relationship of the one light to other lights by virtue of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, that Barth here *first* refers to general or primal revelation.<sup>172</sup> So long as it remains *ad infinitum* uncompromisingly bifurcate from natural theology;<sup>173</sup> at its best it can only be, in Augustine's words, *docta ignorantia*.

Barth's overriding attitude to secular parables, consequently, is *de facto* and *de iure* an optimum Christocentric *rapprochement* which may be represented to be, as Hunsinger encapsulates, either '*exclusivism without [Christian] triumphalism*' or, more correctly, '*inclusivism without compromise*'.<sup>174</sup> It is exclusive because as far as the Christian is concerned Jesus Christ, the one true Light and Word alone, is 'the way, and the truth, and the life' aside from which 'no one comes to [the knowledge of] the Father' unless by way of Jesus Christ.<sup>175</sup> Any other light or word in regardless of its type--'whether secular or religious, theoretical or practical, implicit or explicit'<sup>176</sup>--can only be categorised as 'a thief and a bandit'.<sup>177</sup> Because God is knowable to us only in His grace 'it can make no use of...another kind of knowability of God.... It rejects it [the other light] because on the twofold ground of realism and love it cannot say the two things side by side.'<sup>178</sup> They remain reciprocally exclusive and confront each

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 278, see 293, n. 11. Cf. David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 37.

<sup>175</sup> *John* 14: 6.

<sup>176</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 278.

<sup>177</sup> *John* 10: 1.

<sup>178</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 172.

other with an ‘either/or’ alternative.<sup>179</sup> In this regard, nevertheless, one must not misunderstand Barth as suggesting that all other lights and words outside Christianity are theologically erroneous and thus have been *triumphed* over completely. Nor does he assert that salvation is an eschatological corollary to ‘those who have espoused Christianity as an interrelated set of beliefs and practices’, and that outside its barrier there is ‘nothing of theological significance to learn from others.’<sup>180</sup>

Barth’s attitude towards true secular words, according to Hunsinger, is ‘*inclusive* to such an extent that he alleges that true words which might be in connection with any aspect of the faith and praxis of the Christian community may actually be revealed *extra muros ecclesiae* and ought to be learnt within the community’.<sup>181</sup> In that Jesus Christ, not the Church, has always been *the* ‘source, norm, and centre of all truth no truth of theological significance is excluded from the realm that He establishes’.<sup>182</sup> In ‘both the finitude and the fallenness’ of all human words, whether from *intra* or *extra muros ecclesiae*, all true words will not only be included but over and above degraded, exalted, and reconstructed from without by the miracle of grace.<sup>183</sup> The authenticity of all true human words will never emanate from themselves, and by no means will they be authentic except on the same basis as one can also make mention of a “justified sinner.”<sup>184</sup> Therefore, Barth does not make any concession to natural theology. The efficacy of secular words and truths operates merely on the categorical basis

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<sup>179</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 278.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

of the supremacy of Jesus Christ, so that there is no way from the ‘little lights’ to the Light or from the ‘other words’ to the Word, but only from the Word to the other words.

However, on the other hand, Barth’s attitude is *uncompromising* in the sense that ‘it eliminates the three compromising positions in association with inclusivity--subjectivism, pluralism, and relativism’.<sup>185</sup> Firstly, it eliminates subjectivism thoroughly by deterring the subjectivist assumption that one can define and meet one’s spiritual needs as if they were irrelative to the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>186</sup> Secondly, it eliminates pluralism thoroughly by deterring the pluralist supposition that a certain sort of generic religious piety or experience is the criterion of theological truth.<sup>187</sup> Third and finally, it eliminates relativism thoroughly by deterring the relativist proposition that the reality of cultural conditioning is the *conditio sine qua non* the truth of theological schemes.<sup>188</sup> ‘Exclusivism without triumphalism or inclusivism without compromise’ can be regarded as Barth’s efforts to encourage what is best and discourage what is worst in certain ecclesiastical formations.<sup>189</sup> Hunsinger summarises that in Barth, ‘The logic of his position would seem to advance what he once somewhere described as a “confessing-ecumenical, liberal-conservative” attitude towards the *secular* world, which ‘transcends, yet also overlaps and comprehends, the standard terms of...the modern world.’<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

### III. The Universal Lordship of Jesus Christ

It is in line with Brunner's speaking of a 'new Barth'<sup>191</sup> that most of Barth's commentators hold an opinion that in his later doctrines, especially that of reconciliation, there appears a 'change of direction'<sup>192</sup> from Barth's early hostile and pessimistic attitude towards human nature. He becomes more optimistic about humanity and about that to which it relates, such as 'secular parables of the truth' and world religions.<sup>193</sup> 'What has taken place', for example, Song suggests, 'in the development of Barth's theology is that the positive emphasis in human nature overcomes more and more the negative emphasis in it, which has come to its clearest expression in the treatment of the problem of man in the later volumes of *Church Dogmatics*.'<sup>194</sup> Song draws the conclusion that there is a positive tune 'heard most predominantly in the anthropology' pervading the Barthian *opera*.<sup>195</sup> Bromiley observes the same interweaving of thinking in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* that 'what is said later may entail important modifications of earlier statements'.<sup>196</sup>

In a similar tone, Veitch maintains that 'volume one and volume four of the *Dogmatics* represent in macrocosm what Barth has endeavoured to work out on a more limited scale within the sections. In volume one the *negative* side of the dialectic...emerges as a dominant factor and in volume four the *positive* side

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<sup>191</sup> Emil Brunner, 'The New Barth: Observations on Karl Barth's *Doctrine of Man*,' trans. John C. Campbell, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 4. 2 (1951), 123-135.

<sup>192</sup> Ray S. Anderson, 'Barth and a New Direction for Natural Theology' in *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886*, ed. John Thompson (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 241-266.

<sup>193</sup> Hunsinger, *How to read Karl Barth*, 234.

<sup>194</sup> Choan-Seng Song, 'The Relation of Divine Revelation and Man's Religion in the Theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich' (Th.D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1965), n.p., quoted in Harrison, 'Karl Barth and the Nonchristian Religions,' 210.

<sup>195</sup> Harrison, 'Karl Barth and the Nonchristian Religions,' 210.

<sup>196</sup> Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*, x-xi.

emerges to redress the balance.’<sup>197</sup> However, unlike the others, Veitch argues that comparing the first volume with the proposition that Barth assumes in the fourth volume, ‘the shift in emphasis is *marginal* rather than *crucial*.’<sup>198</sup> The dramatic and obvious modification of Barth’s theological route has widely and long since been ascribed by his commentators, and even Barth himself, to his unique *non-systematic* method that regards ‘systematisation’ as ‘an impractical idea’<sup>199</sup> and ‘always the enemy of true theology’.<sup>200</sup> He does so because he does not think that theology should be confined to any ‘system’ so that he is ‘prevented from allowing any particular locus of theological formulation to become a principle determinative of others.’<sup>201</sup> On this account Will Herberg ascribes to Barth a great honour in accordance with his influence --‘the master theologian of our age’.<sup>202</sup>

This is also the reason why Paul Tillich cites Barth as a theologian *par excellence* of the twentieth-century because ‘he corrects himself again and again in the light of “situation”’.<sup>203</sup> These commentators would agree on the fact that neither the ‘early Barth’ nor the ‘later Barth’ is a *complete* Barth, for either the former or the latter takes very little account of the element of *context*. Only in the summation of both, which takes seriously the context, which determines Barth’s

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<sup>197</sup> Veitch, ‘Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth’, 20.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 18 [italics mine].

<sup>199</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 861.

<sup>200</sup> Barth, ‘A Theological Dialogue’, in *Theology Today*, 19 (1962), 174. Cf. III/3, 294-295; ‘Karl Barth’s Table Talk,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Paper*, no. 10 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), 23-24; Sykes, ‘Barth on the Centre of Theology’, 35-36; Stuart McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 11-14; Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth, A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>201</sup> R. T. Osborn, ‘A New “New Barth”?’ *Interpretatio*, 18 (1964), 71.

<sup>202</sup> Will Herberg, ‘The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth,’ preface to Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (San Francisco: Doubleday Co., 1960), 11.

<sup>203</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1978), 5.

theological direction, can Barth be properly understood. So far as the knowledge of God in his theological development is concerned, to attribute importance of the treatment of natural theology to the early Barth is not *because* it is an interim subject-matter in the past which must be referred to for the sake of academy, but because what thus took place in his doctrine of the knowledge of God constitutes significance for the transformation of his contemporaneity and the construction of the future, i.e., the later Barth. On the other hand, an apparently different way of treating natural theology perceived in the later Barth does not mean a total break with what he did before as though it were all error. Accordingly, although the observations on the diametrical or marginal ‘change’ or ‘new direction’ in Barth’s direction may not be faulted as misunderstanding, unfortunately little attention has been paid to the *point d’appui* which remains soundly unchanged throughout his *Church Dogmatics*, that is, *constant* accentuation on *the grace of God in Jesus Christ* without regard to either the basis or content of the ‘sorry hypothesis of a so-called “natural theology”’.<sup>204</sup>

As has been illustrated in the foregoing chapters in this thesis, while Barth is *prima facie* hostile to humanity after the manner of all kinds of natural theology in the first place, he is *ultima facie* concerned by the capricious replacement of the real Christian knowledge of God, i.e., revelation, by the *analogia entis* and human experience. He intends to safeguard God’s gracious and reconciling action to human beings on His own behalf in Jesus Christ *via negativa*. To put it another way, Barth’s early ruthless rejection of depraved humanity is an *in posse* outwards phenomenon of his *in esse* inwards noumenon

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<sup>204</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 117.



of affirming God's saving in Christ's grace as revelation.<sup>205</sup>

It may be equitable, therefore, to say that in his earlier thinking Barth was not so much explicitly antagonistic with respect to human nature as placing *implicit* stress on the overwhelming sovereignty of God, the *ira Dei*, revealed in Jesus Christ as the *resurrected* Lord who is *unique* and *distinctive from*, but *for*, others. Consequently, the repudiation of fallen humanity 'is only an *indirect* witness to the reality of Jesus Christ and to the original and essential human existence that He inaugurates and reveals' <sup>206</sup> under the circumstances of political and theological crisis in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This is also due to the Church Struggle, at the time of National Socialist rule in Germany, in which he once ardently engaged.<sup>207</sup> As the crisis eventually came to an end, while most people were still having to come to terms with physical or mental post-war traumata whose most harmful consequence perhaps was 'self-alienation', Barth gradually began to disseminate *directly* and *a fortiori* the exaltation (renewal) of humanity and nature by the loving providence of God, the *iustitia Dei*, actualised in the event of reconciliation of Jesus Christ as the *incarnate* Son who is *in common with* others. Therefore Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God is based on, and must be viewed in, the dialectic between the *ira Dei* and the *iustitia Dei* in covenant with His people.

This is the reason why in his post-war writings, Barth often calls his own doctrine of the knowledge of God 'Theo-anthropology' or

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<sup>205</sup> Cf. Aagaard, 'Revelation and Religion', 167.

<sup>206</sup> Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, trans. T. A. Smail (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), 30 [italics mine].

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

‘The-anthropology’.<sup>208</sup> That is to say, Barth consistently and contextually accents the *same* Lord (Jesus Christ) who actualises the *distinctive* attributes of God, His sovereignty and providence, in line with the context, for the benefit of humanity. Pannenberg comments justly that although in his doctrines of creation and reconciliation Barth gradually relinquished the bitter impugment of natural theology and tendered the little lights of creation for a ‘Christological-based universalism’, yet he ‘never made any *material* revision’ in his theology, particularly in the doctrine of the knowledge of God.<sup>209</sup> ‘What he denied was that this revelation is “natural,” viz., that it inheres in nature as a quality.’<sup>210</sup>

It is, therefore, equally mistaken either to animadvert that Barth denies the capacity of God to make Himself known by virtue of nature, or to argue that Barth has secretly corrected the ‘earlier rejection of all natural theology’ in the later stage.<sup>211</sup> Both mistakes overlook Barth’s conviction that since in the event of reconciliation Jesus Christ has renovated the broken relationship among God and His people, God can make, and indeed has made, Himself known without resorting to any kind of natural knowledge of and about Himself.<sup>212</sup> John Webster sees that with this conviction ‘Barth is attempting to safeguard not only the axiomatic divinity of God, but also the authenticity of the creature.’<sup>213</sup> In Barth’s doctrine of the knowledge of God, hence, nature and natural theology must not be confounded as though they had to be accepted, or lumped together,

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<sup>208</sup> See Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 12; ‘Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Humanity of God*, 11; Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 3-4; Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 3ff.

<sup>209</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 102-103 [italics mine].

<sup>210</sup> A. Szekeres, ‘Karl Barth und die natürliche Theologie,’ *Evangelische Theologie*, 24 (1964), 240; 237, cited by Ibid., 103, n. 131.

<sup>211</sup> Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?: An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Collins Publisher, 1980), 525 cited by Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Cf. Godsey, ‘The Architecture of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics’, 245.

<sup>213</sup> Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 33.

as a whole. The all-embracing attitude towards nature and natural knowledge with reference to knowledge of God is summed up by Barth Himself in his letter to Carl Zuckmayer: 'I would gladly concede that *nature* does objectively offer a proof of God, though man overlooks or misunderstands it. Yet I would not venture to say the same of natural *science*, whether ancient or modern.'<sup>214</sup>

In Barth's Christocentric knowledge of God, whose axis is Christ's reconciliation, the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between the 'personal (or impersonal) wholly other' and human beings no longer exists; the gulf has been bridged by the *commonality* of Jesus with the human (or humanity).<sup>215</sup> Insofar as the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the events which 'vindicate universally the revelation of God in Christ, where the non-cognitive side, represented by the new dispensation of the Spirit, was *agape*', they are the events by which 'God announced the beginning of the reconciliation of the world'.<sup>216</sup> Since God does actually address humans in His Word, He obviously considers and treats them as addressable in spite of the fact that humans as sinners close their ears and heart to Him. As God awakens humans to faith by His Holy Spirit, He Himself posits the indispensable point of contact. 'But He is greater than our hearts, making the deaf to hear and the blind to see. That's the way it is.'<sup>217</sup> Barth asserts that

nothing could be further from our minds than to attribute to the human creature as such a capacity to know God and the one Word of God, or

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<sup>214</sup> Karl Barth and Carl Zuckmayer, *A Late Friendship: The Letters of Karl Barth and Carl Zuckmayer*, prefaced by Heinrich Stoevesandt, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 42. Barth dated this letter 7th May 1968, seven months before his decease.

<sup>215</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 10.

<sup>216</sup> Charles P. Price, 'Revelation as Our Knowledge of God: An Essay in Biblical Theology' in *Faith and History: Essays in Honor of Paul W. Meyer*, ed. John T. Carroll, Charles H. Cosgrove and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 333.

<sup>217</sup> Barth, *Letters 1961-1968*, 217.

produce true words corresponding to this knowledge. Even within the sphere of Scripture and the Church there can be no question of any such capacity. If there are true words of God, it is all miraculous.<sup>218</sup>

This, again, leaves no room for natural theology, nor for the Roman Catholics who have long since advocated the precedence of the authority of the tradition of the Church as new ‘public (general) revelation’ over the Word of God. For Barth argues that ‘there is no new “public revelation,”...the tradition consists only in handing on and testifying to the revelation which the apostles received and bare witness to, and...the teaching office is not above the Word of God.... but is in its service’.<sup>219</sup> ‘They can have significance only if they are in the form of a conscientiously necessary [service]...to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.’<sup>220</sup> It is human beings who are ‘affirmed and made new by the revelation of God; it is human beings whom the revelation ‘unites’ with their compeers’.<sup>221</sup> Moreover, it is also human beings who are ‘confronted, in this revelation of God, by an authority that is absolutely above them. For their benefit the Son of God became a human being in Jesus Christ’.<sup>222</sup>

Barth points out that knowledge of God of this kind is non-denominational and inclusive; in other words, it is ‘evangelical’ which signifies the “catholic,”

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<sup>218</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 118.

<sup>219</sup> Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican II*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1969), 26-27. It is to be noted that although the Catholic theologian Philip J. Rosato extols Barth’s final journey to Rome in September 1966, caricatured by Barth himself as a *peregrinatio ad limina apostolorum*, was as such a ‘mutually and fraternally voiced *placet juxta modum*’ (*Ad Limina Apostolorum* in *Retrospect: The Reaction of Karl Barth to Vatican II* in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S. W. Sykes [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 106.) Barth’s rejective position to Roman Catholic Church’s optimistic viewpoint on human efforts in co-operation with divine revelation is fairly consistent from the late 1920s.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>221</sup> Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946-52*, ed. R. G. Smith (London: SCM Press, 1954), 235.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

ecumenical (not to say “conciliar”) *continuity and unity*’ of the attribute of the ‘*God of the Gospel*’.<sup>223</sup> Evangelical knowledge of God aims to comprehend, conceive, and to speak about the God of the Gospel in the midst of the diversity of all other traditions and ‘(without any value-judgment being implied) in distinction from them.’<sup>224</sup> To this extent, the God of the Gospel ‘is the God who mercifully dedicates and delivers Himself to the life of *all* men’ inclusive of their traditions.<sup>225</sup> Overlooking the evangelical dimension will fail to exhaust the ‘free love of God that evokes the response of free love, His love (*charis*) that calls for gratitude (*eucharistia*).’<sup>226</sup>

The reasoning of Barth’s *evangelical* faith-knowledge of God discloses that it would be a critical oversight to reach the conclusion that ‘his exclusivist Christology is at variance with recognising theological truth in the non-Christian’.<sup>227</sup> He believes that, in spite of the fallenness and corruption of the human mind from its integrity, truth which may be part of the knowledge of God is still to be discovered and admired in a secular sphere on account of the prophetic work of reconciliation of Jesus Christ. A proper knowledge of God, for Barth, ‘should keep precisely to the rhythm of its own relevant concerns, and thus consider well what are the *real* needs of the day by which its own programme should be directed.’<sup>228</sup> Therefore the knowledge of God is in no wise a Gnostic or esoteric terminus of certain religious belief in itself. Rather, it is a mystery of and in the ‘one Word of God, Jesus Christ Himself, that cannot

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<sup>223</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 5 [italic mine].

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>227</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, xvi.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

be articulated or expressed by any word or voice of angels, and certainly not of men, whether it be...an enlightened Christian mysticism or a *theologia viatorum*'.<sup>229</sup> It is a faith-knowledge in association with praxis to the extent that the consequences of the being and act of God in Jesus Christ are connected not merely to individuals, but also to their *Sitz im Leben* in which they participate and by which they are influenced.<sup>230</sup> He also affirms that any presumption, in contrast, would not only fail to honour God, but also blaspheme Him.<sup>231</sup> Just as Pannenberg rightly argues,

So long as Christians take seriously their faith in the eschatological revelation of God in Jesus Christ, they will also abide by the exclusivism in Christ's challenge to confessing Him. On the other hand, they too will identify with the inclusivism of their faith in God's creation which implies that no human being as creature of God can exist without any relationship to the creator. Therefore, the revelation of God in His Son also extends to all human beings.<sup>232</sup>

While true words that bear witness to the one Word, or secular truths that reflect the mystery of His kingdom, may be found *in partibus infidelium*, the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ is through and through *the fountain quod ipsum* of the faith-knowledge of God Himself.<sup>233</sup> The universal lordship of Jesus Christ and the reconciling work of God accordingly can be regarded as counterparts. The former signifies the latter and *vice versa*, inasmuch as, to use

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., IV/3, 122.

<sup>230</sup> McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth*, 71. For a brief yet balanced development of Barth's revelatory theology in the socio-political context of 1904-1934 see Aidan Nichols, 'Barth's Theology of Revelation--The Setting in Life,' *Downside Review*, 112 (1994): 153-163; for more detailed cf. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, 'Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth' in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, ed. George Hunsinger (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976): 47-76. Marquardt confidently and plainly concludes: 'Those who think that it [Barth's theology] establishes a theological ontology of transcendence are wrong. Those who see that it is essentially political even in its theological details are correct' (68).

<sup>231</sup> Hunsinger, *How to read Karl Barth*, 234-235. Cf. Rogers, *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 188-189.

<sup>232</sup> Pannenberg, 'The Religions from the Perspective of Christian Theology and the Self-interpretation of Christianity Relation to the Non-Christian Religions', 297.

<sup>233</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 3-4.

William Stacy Johnson's terms, the former is the *eternal* 'presupposition' of the latter, while the latter is the *present* 'consequence' of the former.<sup>234</sup> God's reconciling work through the universal lordship of Christ is, according to Johnson, the 'midpoint' of His 'tradic' act of creation-reconciliation-redemption. The midpoint, reconciliation, which is suspended between the fruition of the primordial covenant of creation, lies behind the present moment, and the eschatological promise of salvation which lies on the distant horizon.<sup>235</sup> This is Barth's major concern over the knowledge of God. In the event of the revelation, according to Barth, the *triune* God reveals Himself to the human race via the other two persons as the indispensable mediations: Jesus Christ is the objective reality and possibility, and the Holy Spirit is the subjective reality and possibility of revelation. It is the revelation of triune God Himself as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit that make up both the *ontological* and *epistemological* foundations of Christian knowledge of God.<sup>236</sup> The focus of the present thesis now shifts to the ontological and epistemological foundations on which Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God is based.

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<sup>234</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 69-70.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 100 and 115.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**THE ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**  
**OF CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE OF GOD**

**I. The Ontological Foundation**

During the summer of 1937 in the time of the German church struggle under National Socialist rule when the German-Christians declared Hitler as a mediator between Christ and the Christian,<sup>1</sup> Barth completed the second half of the prolegomena of his *Church Dogmatics*. Following the doctrine of the Trinity dealt with in the first half, this new volume puts forward the actualisation of revelation in two aspects. As the *objective reality* of revelation Jesus Christ concretises the freedom of God for the human, which in turn furnishes the *possibility* that God *can* become a human being. As the *subjective reality* of revelation the Holy Spirit realises the freedom of the human for God, which also provides the basis of its *possibility*.<sup>2</sup> The two aspects of the revelation of God as a whole rule out any possibility on human side to become capable of bearing divine revelation.<sup>3</sup>

Barth does not deny the fact that there appear to be as many diverse concepts of revelation as there are theologies, because ‘serious doctrinal disagreements’ have arisen among the circles who assert that there is a special revelation.<sup>4</sup> One, therefore, might understand why such a startling and somewhat disturbing question as ‘Has Christianity a revelation?’ was raised, which in its positive sense is beneficial to the explication of Christian faith and identity in

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter one, p. 56, n. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 282.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Helm, *The Divine Revelation*, 20.



helping to clarify ambiguity and controversy.<sup>5</sup> Barth has never denied that there are as many diverse notions of revelation as there are diverse theologies. Each notion ascribes a particular meaning to revelation with the result that drastically distinct conclusions are made from these distinct notions with regard to the nature, namely, the *content* and the *form*, of revelation. However, as a Christian theologian he concerns himself only with the Christian knowledge of the divine revelation; he affirms that the biblical revelation is a unique revelation that in no circumstances can be ‘compared with anything else that is called revelation’.<sup>6</sup>

With Barth it is extremely significant for the Christian to conceive what the revelation of God actually is, as the knowledge of revelation is properly *none other than* the knowledge of God *Himself*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in his theology Barth does not and will not attempt to deal with a general concept of revelation conceived as an account of universal religious experience which is valid in certain *inter alia* circumstances, but outside the range of what he himself means by the term.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> F. Gerald Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964). In this book he eagerly argues that there are at least two major problems in current Christian discussions of revelation which give rise to the whole supposition that Christianity has a revelation a misconception: ‘One is the difficulty of using the word logically and coherently; the other is the difficulty of finding a biblical basis for the ideas it is used to convey.’ (Ibid., 10.) Cf. Helm’s critique (*The Divine Revelation*, 20) of Downing’s view and George W. Stroup’s brief evaluation (*The Promise of Narrative Theology* [London: SCM Press, 1984], 58-59.) Despite all the incongruous interpretations of revelation Stroup suggests an all-embracing and Christian-based cognition, of the meaning of revelation similar to Barth’s position. (*The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 44; also cf. 40-44.)

<sup>6</sup> Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *God in Action*, 16. [italics mine].

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

### (I) *Trinitarian Revelation*

Barth neither originates his concept of revelation from any general idea of revelation nor inquires into the significance of revelation in general from either philosophical trends or the universal history of the development of religion.<sup>9</sup> In other words, when Barth expresses that God has revealed Himself, he ‘always refers to that special event in which God’s Word is spoken’, i.e., the event in which God has revealed Himself in the existence of the person, Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>10</sup>

In conformity with the course of his own theological thinking, Barth attains his concept of revelation from that special *historical event* wherein the Word of God happened, and continues happening to human beings, that is, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> With Barth the revelation of God is unique, an actual, an undeniable and a rational event when ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’ (John 1: 14).<sup>12</sup> This does not merely refer to the birth of Jesus, that is, to the Incarnation, but also to Jesus Christ’s *whole* reality in human history, that is, His life, His teaching, His crucifixion and, paramountly, His

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<sup>9</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I/2, 1-44. It is of account to note that the usage of the term ‘event’ in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* I/1 is always threefold. First, as ‘event’, revelation belongs to the present: the Word of God is not just the theme of Christian proclamation but ‘the *event* in which proclamation becomes real proclamation’ (93; italics mine). Second, Revelation as event excludes its objectification in the form of revealed propositions: therefore the Scriptures is not the Word of God by virtue of ‘a general, uniform and permanent inspiredness’ (112), but only as an *event* when and where the biblical word becomes God’s Word (113; italics mine). Third, revelation as an event disrupts linear time, rather than arising out of it: or it can ‘aim at our existence and smite on the score that it proceeds from a point outside and above us’ (142). Francis Watson criticises that the idea of revelation as event is disputable in three senses: ‘its downplaying or suppression of the cognitive dimension of revelation, its failure to relate revelation to the linearity of temporal experience, and its one-sided emphasis on the immediacy of the divine presence of humans (‘Is Revelation an “Event”?’ *Modern Theology*, 10. 4 [1994], 396.).’

<sup>12</sup> Barth further devotes a forty-page subsection titled ‘Very God and Very Man’ to the theological exegesis of this single passage in *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 132-171. It is worthwhile comparing with T. H. L. Parker, ‘Karl Barth and the Fourth Gospel,’ in *Studies in the Forth Gospel*, ed. F. L. Cross (London: SCM Press, 1957), 52ff.

resurrection. In this sense Stroup is unduly hasty to sum up: ‘Revelation is synonymous with Incarnation.... In the context of Barth’s theology it is clear that revelation refers *only* to...the event of Incarnation.’<sup>13</sup> In his summation Stroup simply emphasises what Barth has said: ‘Revelation in fact does not differ from the person of Jesus...nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him’ conveyed through the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the divine revelation in Barth’s theology is a *Trinitarian* revelation.<sup>15</sup> ‘The revelation of the triune God who according to Scripture and proclamation is the Father of Jesus Christ, is Jesus Christ Himself, and is the Spirit of this Father and this Son.’<sup>16</sup>

Barth understands the fact that in the extraordinary divine motion of revelation, the triune God ‘reveals Himself as the Lord’ which ‘signifies for the concept of revelation that God Himself in unimpaired unity yet also in unimpaired distinction is Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness.’<sup>17</sup> Hartwell analyses, what Barth means firstly is that it is *God the Father* who revealed Himself to humankind in His Son Jesus Christ in His infinity and everlastingness.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, it is *God the Son* who carries out and objectifies this revelation in His own *persona* and *officium* in obedience to this everlasting decree of His Father. In so far as ‘He assumed human nature in the man Jesus of Nazareth and, living and dying as a man among His followmen and for their

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<sup>13</sup> Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., [italics mine]. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 119.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, Chapter Two, The Revelation of God, Part I: The Triune God, 295-489. See also Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (London: Gerald Duckworth Press, 1964), 67-77.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 291. Cf. *God in Action*, 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 295.

<sup>18</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 68.

salvation, accomplished the work of reconciliation'.<sup>19</sup> And thirdly, it is *God the Holy Spirit* who consummates this revelation by making human beings 'capable of receiving it and actually do receive it'.<sup>20</sup> To put it differently, but in Barth's own words, the divine revelation, which took place once for all in the consummation of time, must and really does consecutively *take place* afresh to the individual by means of the *munus triplex* (*munus propheticum*, *munus sacerdotale*, and *munus regium*) of the resurrected Christ and in the *potentia* of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup> God, therefore, is from stem to stern the Subject of revelation in all generations in relation to all human beings and, to individual persons, although not in such a way as to exclude the *coherence* of free human agency with divine sovereignty from the grace of the 'greatest miracle and mystery of the Incarnation'.<sup>22</sup> The notion of human agency in the revelation of God is intensified in *The Christian Life*. He says, the human agent 'who is responsible to the gracious God is the man who is affirmed and loved and elected by God.... He has the freedom to be this man who is justified before God, sanctified for Him, and called by Him.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 60-61.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics*, IV/4, 22. Cf. Hunsinger's exposition of Barth's conception of *double agency*: 'The conception itself posits a relationship of asymmetry, intimacy, and integrity between God and the human being. It posits a fellowship of mutual coinherence and mutual self-giving, mediated in and by Jesus Christ. This fellowship occurs as an absolute miracle, because it subjects the human being to a kind of *Aufhebung*. The human being is affirmed in wholeness, cancelled in sin and mere finitude, and taken up into an inconceivable fellowship of participation in the eternal life of God.... The miracle and mystery of double agency is thus understood to be patterned after the great miracle and mystery of the Incarnation, in which the former finds its basis, limit, and final hope' (*How to Read Karl Barth*, 223; see also 185-224). John Webster holds a similar view too while stressing: 'Barth's understanding of [human] ethical agency is twofold: at one and the same time it accords considerable significance to human action and yet also relativises our acts, preventing them from assuming absolute status in the definition personhood.' (*Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 75; *vide* also 76, 99-115, 223f.).

In ascribing the divine revelation to the gracious work of the God who assumes ‘threefold yet single lordship...as Father, Son, and Spirit’,<sup>24</sup> what Barth constantly has in mind is ‘neither a formal category nor a description of general religious experience’<sup>25</sup> which consists of human effort. However, Trinitarian revelation cannot concur with the teaching of the so-called *vestigium trinitatis*. To identify the distinction between these two concepts, which are *prima facie* similar, is exceedingly significant in Barth’s theology, with a view to debarring any human ‘element’ from the divine action.<sup>26</sup> Barth argues ‘critically and polemically’ that the biblical notion of revelation as such is itself the root of the doctrine of the Trinity that stems solely from the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ or the Lord rather than from any other root.<sup>27</sup> He moves on to point out that the ‘problem of the *vestigium trinitatis*’ is that it attempts to invent an *analogy* between the Trinity (the Trinitarian God of Christian revelation) and a creaturely reality, which quite apart from God’s revelation, manifests in its own structure by creating a certain similarity to the structure of the Trinitarian concept of God, so that it may be regarded as an image of the Trinitarian God Himself.<sup>28</sup>

Under the cloak of ‘*trinitas*’, the *vestigium trinitatis*, like all forms of natural theology which claim to be secondary sources of God’s revelation, is another hypothesis of a general revelation in creation that *toto caelo* derives ‘from nature, from culture, from history, and from the life of the soul.’<sup>29</sup> Barth contends that the *vestigium trinitatis* is nothing other than an expression of the

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<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 334.

<sup>25</sup> Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 333.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 336-338.

indefensible *analogia entis* and, even though used merely as elucidation, must be led astray to the illusion of a Supreme Being, who is different from the God of revelation.<sup>30</sup> The *vestigium trinitatis*, accordingly, does not and cannot reveal God, the created world and human beings as they actually are, in that it is in need of the knowledge of God's reconciling *officium* in Jesus Christ and the knowledge of Jesus Christ Himself, of His person and action, to obtain authentic knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Through authentic knowledge human beings come to know who and what God and themselves really are and thereby come to realise for what purpose the world has been created. This once more explains why Barth's concept of revelation leaves no space for a revelation or revelations antecedent to that one which has occurred in Jesus Christ, and why such views as 'original', 'partial', and 'progressive' revelation are excluded from it.<sup>32</sup>

On that account, the doctrinal propositions which the Church confess, i.e., 'the formulated dogmas', are not revelation as such either.<sup>33</sup> They are, as the rational efforts of human beings, only a human attempt to encapsulate or to formulate the incomprehensible and unqualified content of the divine revelation, and are always only on the way to the truth of revelation. In revelation God does not reveal and communicate by means of dogmatic (theological) language by which they declare with pride: '*Vestigia trinitatis in creatura*'!<sup>34</sup> Neither does He reveal and communicate by means of general truths, but, instead, by way of His revelational word and His sovereign will, for the world and humankind, by

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 340.

which the truth ‘*vestigia creaturae in trinitate*’ is disclosed to the Church.<sup>35</sup> For it is ‘not that the language could grasp the revelation, but that revelation, the very revelation correctly and normatively understood in the formulated dogma, could grasp the language’. That is to say, by means of, and on the basis of, revelation both sufficient and adequate constituents may be found in the familiar language adopted by all to be able to talk about revelation, ‘not exhaustively or appropriately or correctly, but still to some extent intelligibly and perspicuously...with prospect of success to denote certain factors and relations in what can be said about revelation.’<sup>36</sup> So far as Barth is concerned, the genuine *vestigium trinitatis* is only to be ascertained in the worldly forms of the revealed, written and proclaimed Word of God and therefore in the creaturely forms which God Himself has assumed in His revelation.<sup>37</sup>

As the Christian revelation is a unique and concrete operation of the triune God, Scripture does not by itself a substitute for the revelation of God; nevertheless, it bears testimony to it.<sup>38</sup> The Word of God is in fact God in Scripture, for in the Old Testament era, ‘God once spoke as Lord to Moses and the prophets’, and in the New Testament ‘to the Evangelists and apostles’, and now by way of the ‘written words He speaks as the same Lord to His Church’.<sup>39</sup> The Holy Scripture, then, of itself is concreate and the Word of God inasmuch as ‘by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation.’<sup>40</sup> It has attested to human beings the ‘lordship of the triune God in

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., I/2 457.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

the incarnate Word by the Spirit'.<sup>41</sup> Therefore they now understand in what sense and to what extent it denotes a 'superior authority' coinciding with the 'proclamation of the Church'.<sup>42</sup> Nor does the proclamation of the Church concur with divine revelation as the Word of God is God Himself in the proclamation of the Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Scripture and the proclamation of the Church can indeed become the Word of God by the free grace of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, and only in that case appear to be identical to revelation.<sup>44</sup> It is important to notice that Barth's conception of revelation requires as an integral part of it in that the revelation comprehended by him *penetrates through* to the human race.<sup>45</sup> For him this revelation is revelation only if it is entirely 'recognised, acknowledged and accepted' by the human race.<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, the objective reality of revelation is a recounting of '*what* (or more precisely *who*) is revealed, the cognitive content of revelation, which Christians believe to be God's self-disclosure in Jesus of Nazareth.'<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the subjective reality of revelation is a description of *how* God's Word becomes a reality in the midst of human words--the form which God's Word assumes, irrespective of 'whether it is the unmediated (or immediated) appearance of the Word in the Incarnation or the mediated sense in which the human words of proclamation and Scripture become God's Word.'<sup>48</sup> Evidently, Barth's twofold interpretation, the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 743-744.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 744.

<sup>45</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 49.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of revelation, is, in fact, nothing less than the distinction between content and form of the same revelation of God. For ‘*what* one knows in revelation cannot be separated from a description of *how* revelation takes place. Knowledge of the event of revelation is inseparable from knowledge of that which is revealed.’<sup>49</sup>

Barth’s method is invariably based on the fact that ‘the possibility of the knowledge of God springs from God, in that He is Himself the truth and He gives Himself to man in His Word by the Holy Spirit to be known as truth.’<sup>50</sup> The objective reality of revelation (Jesus Christ) and the subjective reality of revelation (the Holy Spirit) are tackled preparatory to the scrutiny of the question of their possibility. This methodological inclination to the *res revelata* does again corroborate the fact that Barth takes *the* faith in the Word of God as the irreplaceable starting point of his thinking.<sup>51</sup> On the ground of faith, the word ‘reality’ expressed in this context signifies not merely that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ has *de facto* happened, but also is continuously happening. This is based solely on the strength of the reality of revelation; that its possibility also can and must be considered.<sup>52</sup>

In short, on Barth’s part, the explication of the reality of revelation takes priority over the investigation of the possibility of revelation, because the possibility is to be stemmed from, and is comprised in, its reality.<sup>53</sup> This theological insight is primarily enlightened by Anselm’s theory applied in *Cur Deus homo?* where, Barth suggests, Anselm did not presume *a priori* that the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>50</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 25-26.

reality of the incarnation of God was confined to the supremacy of the divine revelation that might have determined the possibility (necessity) of the incarnation.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, Anselm pondered *a posteriori* over the question succeeding to the belief in the truth of the incarnation, then proved its possibility.<sup>55</sup> However, Barth insists that his own approach cannot be called *rationalistic*, in that it is based on revelation.

This signifies that, in keeping with Anselm's 'peculiar method' of *Nachdenken* in quest of revelation, which is exercised throughout all his writings, Barth does not think of the reality on the base of an arbitrarily constructed possibility, but 'thinks of its possibility on the basis of its reality'.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Barth, like Anselm, has 'not deduced revelation *a priori*, only to find it subsequently, *a posteriori*, fulfilled in Christ.'<sup>57</sup> In this sense, the knowledge of the divine revelation taking place, the path from reality to possibility, in the light of Anselm's dictum *credo ut intelligam*, Barth suggests, means that 'in view of the fact that in faith God's objective truth has met and mastered me, I am determined under the instruction of this truth alone to give an account of the encounter in thought and speech.'<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>55</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 8-10. In addition to Anselm's *Cur Deus homo?* the *Heidelberg Catechism* is also mentioned by Barth as the second classical example in support of his contention. In questions 12-19 of the Catechism the pronouncement upon Christ as the reality of the Mediator and Redeemer is confessed prior to His possibility although it *prima facie* takes the other way round (*Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 8-9).'

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

(II) *The Content of Revelation--  
Jesus as the Objective Reality and Possibility*

As hitherto considered, God's Word became a bodily and tangible reality in the person and life of Jesus of Nazareth in divine revelation; it is that event in human history to which Christians refer as the 'Incarnation'. This concrete historical event in which the eternal Word of God became a visible reality is what Barth now accounts for as '[Jesus Christ] the *objective reality of revelation*' or as 'God's revelation *for us*'.<sup>59</sup> The fact that God reveals Himself in His Word purports that God's intentions along with His acts are exhibited in the life and death of the person Jesus of Nazareth. He takes part in the 'this-worldly, terrestrial history' and provides a 'unique demonstration of [His] existence in the man Jesus Christ'.<sup>60</sup> Revelation of God, on this account, is 'objective' because it comprises a historical referent that 'can be looked at, examined, and discussed.'<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, it must not be overlooked, Barth treats the objective dimension revelation of God as deliberately as to distinguish the *primary* objectivity from the *secondary* objectivity of God in reference to the knowledge of God. In other words, it is the distinction between the knowledge of the God who makes Himself known in His Word and the knowledge of the reality of God which is mediated by Himself to human beings and found in the history of the encounters of God with His people recounted in the Old and the New Testaments. Here Barth is speaking of a twofold objectivity of God--'primary and secondary objectivity of God'.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., [italics mine].

<sup>60</sup> Karl Barth, *Fragments, Grave and Gay*, ed. with a forward and epilogue by Martin Rumscheidt, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Collins Publisher, 1971), 29.

<sup>61</sup> Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 48.

<sup>62</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 16; also cf. 3-31.

The triune God's self-revealing, i.e., the Christian revelation, can be regarded as a personal revelation from 'subject to subject', from the Divine Being to a human being, and hence stands for itself as an *ich-du* relationship, in which the Spirit of God is in communication with the spirit of the human. Nonetheless, since it is the Lord who in this manner communicates with His creature, theologians are bound to begin their thinking within the range of faith in God's revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>63</sup> Outside the range of faith, Barth insists, 'theology could not even perceive its subject, not to speak of classifying it with ease or excitement.'<sup>64</sup>

Now what Barth attempts to do is to visualise the objective possibility of the revelation of God which has already been presupposed and made available to knowledge in the objective reality. His arguments rest with one single but multi-dimensioned question to which Jesus Christ the objective reality of the revelation of God constitutes, or even *is*, the only answer.<sup>65</sup> It is a question that cannot be regarded as a general question of theological anthropology which can be brought up independently and then implemented beyond the pale of the reality of Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup> Rather is it '*the* question aroused in us by the reality of Jesus Christ, thrust at us by it...and rendered meaningful and necessary by its own relation to the question.'<sup>67</sup> The question, which stems from Anselm's interrogation '*Cur Deus homo?*', is: how far is the reality of Jesus Christ an adequate basis for the encounter of God's revelation with human beings as well

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<sup>63</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 71. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 5; cf. II/1, 10; Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 89-95.

<sup>64</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 5; cf. II/1, 10; Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 89-95.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 26 [italics mine].

as for its effectual performance?<sup>68</sup>

At this point Barth argues that he is not presuming God's revelation to be inferior to a possibility, which might at the start be the foundation of its reality, from an intuition into which human knowledge of this reality would first become an assumed knowledge. He is virtually inquiring about the substantive possibility 'presupposed and grounded in revelation and through revelation, and only to be known from and in it.'<sup>69</sup> This question, for Barth, is significant and must not be left unanswered inasmuch as 'it is with God's revelation that we are concerned in this reality...as it concerned us.'<sup>70</sup> It is also on account that it signifies the human's sincere interest in, devotion and commitment of themselves to the revelation of God. According to Barth the objective possibility of revelation is unfurled by five implications of the reality, namely, the only answer to the question.<sup>71</sup>

First, in the freedom of His gracious condescension, God wills and does cross the boundary between His divine existence and nature 'as Lord, Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer' and the humans' 'as creatures and sinners deemed to die' to encounter human beings without ceasing to be awesome and holy.<sup>72</sup> There is 'no obstacle to Him in the act of His revelation.'<sup>73</sup> Second, God indeed has the freedom to meet human beings not by the materialisation of His divine hypostasis, but by His fully divine-human incarnation in the person of the Son or

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 31.

Word.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, ‘in view of the mutual inner unity of these three modes of God’s existence’ the incarnation of the Son is always with the Father and the Spirit.<sup>75</sup> Third, the reality evinces that the Son assumed humanity, becoming a perceptible being who is known by human analogy with other such beings living and dying ‘at a definite point in space and time...like us all.’<sup>76</sup> The Son of God, as a result, is not ‘a stranger’ to us, but a person who can be seen ‘physically or spiritually or both at once’.<sup>77</sup> Fourth, the Son is veiled even in His unveiling as a human being. That is to say, while becoming flesh in the person of Jesus as the Son, God ‘at the same time is and remains what He is, the true and eternal God’.<sup>78</sup> Fifth and finally, the Son or Word becomes flesh, as what we are is known to us, not in such a conception as can be acquired *a priori* from a general anthropology or other sources. Rather, it is known to us ‘liable to die’ that albeit He is not sinful Himself, He stands with us under the ‘just judgment and wrath’ of God ‘in the midst of death’, in order that we are encountered by ‘an eternal redemption through Him.’<sup>79</sup> This is the objective possibility which makes God’s revelation possible because it is a reality, veiled in divine unveiling.<sup>80</sup>

Barth earnestly maintains that it is not on any *ad hoc* inherent capacity of humanity as a bearer of, or means for, God’s revelation that the divine necessity (and therewith the possibility) whereby revelation had to be incarnation, rests.<sup>81</sup> In the last analysis, it is only on the base of God’s free grace in Jesus Christ alone

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., I/2, 40.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 43. Cf. II/1, 194.

‘that the Word had to be flesh, in order that thus and not otherwise God’s revelation might become objectively possible.’<sup>82</sup>

(III) *The Form of Revelation--  
The Spirit as the Subjective Reality and Possibility*

Having illustrated that God is free for the human in Jesus Christ, Barth now proceeds to demonstrate that the human is free for God in the Holy Spirit. In addition to the objective dimension in Barth’s interpretation of revelation, there is also the *subjective dimension*, inasmuch as he argues that revelation is not simply a spatio-temporal event that happened once *illic et tunc* in the irretrievable days of yore, but also a reality that re-befalls from time to time in the experience of contemporary individuals and communities. Accordingly, on the ground of Trinitarian revelation, the objective and subjective dimensions are two inseparable differentiated aspects of the unique and identical revelation of God, united in and sprung from it.<sup>83</sup> What concerns Barth are the questions as to how it truly helps human beings to believe what exactly happens in Jesus Christ. Of what value would it be to human beings if they could believe in a purely objective way? With Barth, of course, it is faith which responds to and receives revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>84</sup> Barth deems this ‘the subjective reality of revelation’ or ‘God’s revelation *in us*’<sup>85</sup>, resorting to the outpouring of the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., I/2, 44.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Barth, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostle’s Creed*, trans. J. Strathearn McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), 130.

<sup>84</sup> F. W. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit-- An Essay in Barthian Theology* (London: Elliot Stock, 1933), 87.

<sup>85</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 1 [italics mine].

Spirit.<sup>86</sup>

The human words of Scripture, Christian preaching and the sacraments become occasions in which the Word of God becomes a present reality by the aid of the grace of God the Holy Spirit. In other words, what happened *illic et tunc* in the life and person of Jesus of Nazareth has become a *hic-et-nunc* reality.<sup>87</sup> When this occurs, the human words of Scripture and proclamation become authentic witnesses to that event in which the Word of God is revealed in the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Human words do not cease to be thoroughly human, but they are ‘elevated’ as well as ‘exalted’.<sup>88</sup> These human words, which bear witness to the Word, are identified with the Word of God in the sense that they are confirmed, preserved, and fulfilled.<sup>89</sup>

Jesus of Nazareth, whom Barth regards as the objective reality that was a historical event, now becomes the ‘subjective reality’ in the experience of individuals and communities. By ‘subjective’ Barth means that it is God, in His hypostasis of being which Christians profess to be the ‘Holy Spirit’, who pursues the human encounter with the Word of God in Jesus Christ, thus making the subjective reality of revelation possible.<sup>90</sup> What the Christian has to explain is how there is such a thing as faith and obedience, i.e., in the biblical sense, God’s work and gift in human freedom to believe in Him and to obey Him. It is in this sense, which the Christian must, of course, consider in detail, that he or she

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 204f. Cf. II/1, 148, 252; Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 99-102

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., I/1, 131.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 132-133. In accordance with Barth, three senses in which the human words of proclamation and Holy Scripture are ‘elevated’ and become the Word of God: (1) they are lifted up and made visible, tangible, and knowable; (2) they are made relative and signify the limits of what human words can accomplish; and (3) they are secured in the sense that they are confirmed, preserved, and fulfilled.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., I/2, 205.



has to regard the concept of ‘the subjective’, when he or she speaks of the ‘subjective reality of revelation’.<sup>91</sup>

To Barth, revelation regarded simply as objective event is not yet really revelation. For revelation is ‘the presence of God Himself’ as such, inasmuch as ‘it is not only an event proceeding from God but also an event that reaches man.’<sup>92</sup> He believes that revelation, in order to be true revelation, cannot simply be objective, but must be subjective too, because it is the work of the Son or Word of God that God can speak to the human. It is in the work of the Holy Spirit that they hear the Word of God.<sup>93</sup> Revelation hence indicates the creation by the Holy Spirit of the ‘new human being’ who is *capax Dei*, because ‘not God alone, but God and man together constitute the content of the Word of God attested in Scripture.’<sup>94</sup> It should take into consideration free human actions in reception of God’s revelation; yet they are free human actions ‘only so far as they have their possibility in God.’<sup>95</sup> To the effect that, the freedom of the human ‘can only be a freedom created by God in the act of His revelation’<sup>96</sup> and endowed to them at the moment of God confronting human beings ‘as the Lord confronts the servant, the Creator the creature, the Reconciler the pardoned sinner, the redeemer the one who never ceases to expect His redemption, the Holy Spirit the Virgin Mary.’<sup>97</sup> In a word, ‘it can only be God’s own freedom.’<sup>98</sup>

Accordingly, in its subjective aspect, revelation is on the human side an

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid; cf. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit*, 85-127.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Ibid., II/1, 99-100.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., I/2, 207.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 205.

event of faith; in its objective aspect, it can be received by human beings solely in faith and by grace.<sup>99</sup> For in accordance with his fundamental concept that fallen human beings are incapable of knowing God, Barth argues that there is no point of contact for the Word of God in human beings as such, but this point of contact is created by the work of the Spirit in human beings, tallying with the witness of the Scriptures. Consequently, what is inherent in the recipients of revelation is by no means an anthropological point of contact but a theological one.<sup>100</sup>

Human beings, according to Barth, are converted into the recipients of revelation not merely invisibly and inwardly, but also devastatingly visibly and outwardly ‘in the definite area of the Church’ by God rather than by its membership.<sup>101</sup> In the Church, which originates from the ‘omnipotent Word of God’ that became flesh, sinners are justified, sanctified and counted the children of God by grace who live exclusively for Christ’s sake.<sup>102</sup> The life of God’s children is *ipso facto* not only a divine, eternal and invisible life, that is not in virtue of Christian candour or compassion, yet ‘grounded upon the one Christ’,<sup>103</sup> but also a human, temporal, and therefore tangible and visible life of ‘koinonia,’<sup>104</sup> It is strictly in the light of this sense that Cyprian’s maxim that ‘there is no salvation outside of the Church’ can be comprehended properly. With Barth ‘*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*’ is always an assertion that for every man, at every time and place, the subjective reality of revelation is fulfilled in a

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., II/1, 99

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.; Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 84.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 209-214.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 214-215.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 216.

temporal encounter and decision, an encounter and decision which can be seen and thought and experienced.’<sup>105</sup>

This is a crucial starting-point from which Barth fathoms that, as regards human reception of and belief in the Word of God, even this subjective dimension branches off an objective and a subjective dimension. Here revelation signifies God’s giving by the Holy Spirit, as well as humans’ receiving in the same Spirit, both taking place in the Church. But the question is, how does revelation come from Christ to and into humans? For, as in preparation for entering upon His own saving activity Jesus ‘has Himself been baptised...in order “to fulfil all righteousness”’,<sup>106</sup> so Barth persists that in relation to the fact that the Word has become flesh two things are still required for revelation to be revealed to human beings, for Christ to become the Saviour of His people. Firstly, there must be something *objective*--a special presentation of revelation on behalf of humankind, so that it may find and reach them, so that their hearts may be pure, open, ready for it.<sup>107</sup> Secondly, only then something *subjective* in the more restricted sense that humankind now really accept and possess the Holy Spirit and with it acceptance for Christ, the real capacity to listen to the Word spoken to them.<sup>108</sup>

Shifting to the subjective possibility of revelation, Barth commences by averring that neither *in* nor *of* themselves humans are free for God ‘except in the Holy Spirit.’ The work of the Spirit *per se* restrains them from envisioning any

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 222-223.

other possibility of their freedom for God.<sup>109</sup> However, at any rate, humans are not desperate because by the Holy Spirit, and thus in the ‘unity of the free grace of God with His unconditional adoration’<sup>110</sup> by humans, God takes the initiative to reach them in three sequential ways. God reaches humans by the unity of the Son and the Spirit in His revelation and freedom, by bringing His Word to their hearing.<sup>111</sup> ‘It is Christ, the Word of God, brought to the hearing of humans by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who is the human possibility of being the recipient of divine revelation’.<sup>112</sup>

God reaches humans by disciplining them to be humble, modest, patient, and faithful hearers through the unity of the Son and the Spirit, according to the teachings of the Scripture and Reformation.<sup>113</sup> Human beings, therefore, have to realise that as recipients of revelation, they are brought under God’s judgment and only because of this are they brought under God’s promise at the same time. It is, in addition, ‘only because of this that God meets them as the One who intercedes for them, who undertakes and directs their cause, who does not thus quench their own capacity and will and accomplishment, but subordinates it to His own’.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, in Barth’s eyes, God reaches humans by way of appointing the Word to become, unavoidably, their only Master by the power of the Holy Spirit. The meaning of the word ‘master’ is dwelt upon as ‘teacher, leader or lord’ whose counterpart may as well be ‘pupil, scholar, follower or adherent, or

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., I/2, 243.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 246ff.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 260-265.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 260.

servant.’<sup>115</sup> He is the Master ‘from whom human beings can no longer withdraw’,<sup>116</sup> and ‘to which in all human obedience or disobedience they are always responsible and subject.’<sup>117</sup> He is also the Master who subjects human beings to a command, ‘in face of which there can be neither subterfuge nor excuse’.<sup>118</sup> Yet, He does not obtrude on them a ‘new and final and frightful, because unending, responsibility’ aside from His grace.<sup>119</sup>

Here Barth sheds bright light upon the convergence of the objective and subjective revelation of God in that, he insists, ‘subjective revelation can consist only in the fact that objective revelation, the one truth which cannot be added to or bypassed, comes to the human and is recognised and acknowledged’ by him or her.<sup>120</sup> Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity brings forth the fact that God, to be known as the subject of His being, is *also* the subject of His being known and becoming known. Barth insists, it would be impossible to mention a ‘*knowledge* of God, should in this knowledge the knowing God not genuinely *know*, and hence not be the subject of the knowledge of God’.<sup>121</sup> However, inasmuch as the knowing human is the *subject* of the knowledge of God, God must be talked about as *object* of this knowledge, and thus it is indispensable to speak of God’s *being-as-object*.<sup>122</sup> God as the object, nonetheless, of the knowledge of God is so distinct from all other objects of conceptual knowledge, strictly in His being-as-object, that this being-as-object, *cannot* be determined from the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God’s Being in Becoming*, trans. Horton Harris (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 42.

objectivity of other objects.<sup>123</sup>

#### (IV) *The Being and Act of God*

Barth's concept of revelation is actualistic. Negatively speaking, this means that God cannot be defined in any static or inactive term, as He has been defined in certain theologies and philosophies. For Barth, as Regin Prenter observes, sees that God's existence in the human world only in each *sui generis* act of His self-revelation.<sup>124</sup> Yet, there is also a positive aspect, which is overlooked by Prenter, purporting that God is alive in a setting of active relationships of love and freedom, that 'constitute God's being in and for itself.'<sup>125</sup>

By accenting the *Trinitarian* aspect of God's revelation to humans in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, Barth is able to be free of the all-too prejudiced accusations brought against him; of either being a faith objectivist (by Arnold B. Come) in 'the emptying of faith', overstressing Jesus Christ to be the object of the faith,<sup>126</sup> or subjectivist like Schleiermacher (by Wolfhart Pannenberg), considering 'subjective belief' the foundation of 'the sole criterion of...the faith'.<sup>127</sup> On the other hand, as Thomas W. Currie III notes, the ultimate purpose of Barth's Trinitarian approach to the knowledge of God is to highlight

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<sup>123</sup> Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 43. See Hunsinger's admirable analysis of this significant, but somewhat complex and subtle, relationship of the two aspects of revelation to humans in *How to Read Karl Barth*, 102. Cf. John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33-38.

<sup>124</sup> Regin Prenter, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth's Positivism of Revelation' in *World Come of Age--A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Collins Publisher, 1967), 106.

<sup>125</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 30.

<sup>126</sup> Arnold B. Come, *An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 158ff.

<sup>127</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 42-48. Cf. Paul D. Molnar's critique of Pannenberg's bias in this matter in 'Some Problems with Pannenberg's Solution to Barth's "Faith Subjectivism,"' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 48 (1995), 315-339.

the unity of the being and act of God.<sup>128</sup>

It has been shown, the consequences of this emphasis are not just to be found negatively in his rejection of any kind of natural theology, as though he is not *primarily* concerned about a perceived congruence between the being and act of God and human experience of Him. They are also to be found positively in his view that God has fulfilled what He does, whose being is not added to or subtracted from by His act, but who *is* His act in His determination to be Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and no other. Obviously, Christian knowledge of God, for Barth, is by no means to begin with God as a hypothesis, presupposition or project of thinking. Rather, 'God is the one whose being can be investigated only in the form of a continuous question as to His action.'<sup>129</sup> The knowledge of the being of God, whose unity and integrity, whose life and activity in Jesus, is active, can only be seen within Himself. The '*action* and *being* define each other. What God has done and is doing is critical!'<sup>130</sup> This is both the logical and actual ground of such knowledge in the unity and diversity, the coinherence and particularity of God's being in act.

Along this way God's being *acts*. His being precedes human beings, forerunning their questions, and is independent of the predicates or attributes that human beings may wish to assign to Him. Not merely in His act but in His being Himself the ground and fulfilment of that act does this God assign His own predicates. 'Yet, precisely in so doing', Currie III claims, 'He makes possible a

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<sup>128</sup> Thomas W. Currie III, 'The Being and Act of God,' in *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886*, ed. John Thompson (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 1-11. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 295-296

<sup>129</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 61.

<sup>130</sup> Stuart D. McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 14.

genuine encounter between Himself and us.’<sup>131</sup> Jesus Christ alone, therefore, is the actual and logical ground, the ontic and epistemic basis for Christian knowledge of God.<sup>132</sup> God’s beginning in Jesus Christ signifies not just something about His *being*, such that this *act* is not fully apprehended as God’s act until it is seen as rooted in His being, who He is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His act of revealing is grounded in His being, because if God ‘forbids the question of God’s being as a particular question, or leaves us in doubt about this particular question, it means that it gives us no real revelation of God.’<sup>133</sup> In opposition to any presupposed capacities within human beings, Barth finds the fact that the being of God in His act of self-interpretation creates not only knowledge of *God* but also true knowledge, *viz.*, the conceptual understanding appropriate to God’s being in His act. Barth believes that human beings can know God in such a way that human knowing, while remaining theirs and not His (namely, indirectly and *per analogiam fidei*) is nevertheless real and true knowledge; in that God has made Himself known, it is absolutely possible to know Him.<sup>134</sup> For that reason alone, and because Barth sees in this act God’s precious positive gift of Himself, he refuses to do anything else but celebrate and witness to the God who is *with us*. This accounts for Barth’s ironical scepticism towards natural theologies and his rejection of them as finally futile on the basis of the most basic affirmation of the faith that ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.’ It indicates the unity of God’s being and act, and closes the door to any dualistic attempts to isolate one from another, either

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<sup>131</sup> Currie III, ‘The Being and Act of God’, 5.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Colin Gunton, ‘No Other Foundation: One Englishman’s Reading of *Church Dogmatics* Chapter V’ in *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth’s Birth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (London: Mowbray Press, 1988), 71.

<sup>133</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 259.

<sup>134</sup> Currie III, ‘The Being and Act of God’, 6.



by means of an intrinsic theological ontology or some pre-determined decision as to what is possible to be known.<sup>135</sup>

This section can be summed up in this way: With regard to the Trinitarian revelation of God, Barth is *ontologically* objective yet *epistemologically* subjective in that he believes that what is revealed consists of an objective existence, the event of God-in-Christ happening *to* and *in us*, independent of any spectator's observation. He also trusts that specially revealed knowledge of God is not something which is static, given once-for-all and thus capable of being retained and communicated to the other.<sup>136</sup> The revelation of God is always Jesus Christ in all He was, taught and did, and as such it is the one, full, complete revelation of God to the human. This revelation, nevertheless, immediately makes us, in relation to the Father, the Revealer from whom all things derive and with the Holy Spirit whose work is to soften human hearts, open up human lives to accept Jesus Christ as grace and the truth. Since revelation is all of God, and since it is the triune God who is made known, one must so speak of revelation in its subjective and objective dimensions.<sup>137</sup>

In respect of the distinction between the objective and subjective realities of divine revelation, between the content and the form of the Word of God, Barth is motivated to speak of the Word as the primary authority in Christian life and theology and to identify that Word with Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>138</sup> At the same time, Barth is able to attribute a relative authority to the human words of Scripture and proclamation in so far as they fulfil their proper function as witness to God's

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Helm, *The Divine Revelation*, 40.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 6.

primary self-disclosure in the Nazarene.<sup>139</sup> One further point that must be made is, the cadre of Barth's Christocentric teachings, as to the divine revelation and the knowledge of God, is by no means an advocacy to keep the human moral duty at arm's length, since humans are always at God's mercy. They do not intend to disqualify human ethical action 'but reorients that action'.<sup>140</sup>

Barth's interpretation formulates a doctrine of revelation which does not need to be reconstructed posterior to each new discovery in scientific investigation, the historical research and the comparative study of Christianity in general and Scripture in particular.<sup>141</sup> In that, Barth refuses to identify the human words of Holy Scripture and proclamation with the Word of God *per se*, so that he is able to define that revelation impairs neither the human character of faith nor the freedom of God. What is essential to Barth in this regard is the actuality of God's being in His act and the ground of the act in the activity and eternity of God's triune life, from this reality proceeding every possibility, noetic and ontic.<sup>142</sup>

## II. The Epistemological Foundation

In the foreword to *Reformed Dogmatics* by Heinrich Heppe, recalling his own first lectures in dogmatics in opposition to all sorts of natural theology at the University of Göttingen in 1924/25,<sup>143</sup> Barth points out and reprimands the fact

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> These lectures were originally intended to be titled 'Prolegomena to Dogmatics' by Barth, but were required to amend as 'Prolegomena to *Reformed Dogmatics*' under the compulsion of the resistance from the Lutheran theological faculty. (See the letter from the Dean A. Rahlfs to Barth dated 22nd December, 1923 in Bernd Jaspert ed., *Karl Barth ~ Rudolf Bultmann Letters*

that one of the most critical failures which has often been disregarded by the Christian is the philosophisation of dogmatics.<sup>144</sup> In so doing, Barth was meant to affirm the authority and richness of the Word of God for Christian knowledge of God, to reprehend the inadequacy of the neo-Protestant's searching for a philosophical Supreme Being at the instance of human noetic intellect. Constantly bearing this major presupposition in mind, Barth insists that *the* Christian knowledge of God originates from and *is* God's revelation in the form of the '*Deus dixit*'. 'God has spoken, and has been heard by the community of faith.'<sup>145</sup> In other words, it is an address after the manner of revelation, as attested by the prophets and apostles in Holy Scripture, to the chosen on God's initiative, which postulates the hearers' obedient hearing and acceptance in faith endowed by the Holy Spirit, that seeks knowledge of God.

### (I) *The 'Deus Dixit'*

It has already been indicated in chapter one that in renouncing all kinds of possibilities for establishing *theologia naturalis*, namely natural knowledge of

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1922-1966, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982], 113. Cf. Reiffen's preface and Daniel L. Migliore, 'Karl Barth's First Lectures in Dogmatics: *Instruction in the Christian Religion*,' in Barth's *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, IX-XI; XV-XVI). However, Barth resolutely refused to agree on this designation because, for him, 'there can be no Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed dogmatics, but properly understood, in principle, content, and the intention there can be only Christian dogmatics (Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 293), and '*Reformed Dogmatics* is as ecumenical as any other' (James D. Smart ed. and trans., *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925* [London: Epworth Press, 1964], 166)]. To do so, therefore, 'would seem to imply that Reformed is a sectarian teaching alongside dogmatics, i.e., Lutheran dogmatics (*Karl Barth~Rudolf Bultmann Letters*, 114). Having had a 'great quarrel with the *faculty* about the title', Barth made an appeal to the Minister of Culture at Berlin, the Reformed Moderator for Germany, and the Hanover Superintendent. As a result, it turned out that he had lost the case, the lectures were reluctantly altered as '*Instruction in the Christian Religion*' published in English as *The Göttingen Dogmatics*.

<sup>144</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), vi-vii.

<sup>145</sup> Trevor Hart. 'Karl Barth, the Trinity and Pluralism' in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 131.

God, Barth pursues *theologia revelata*, namely, the *Verbum Dei*, as the alternative to it, and, above all, as the only genuine resource of knowledge of the *real* God.<sup>146</sup> ‘The principle behind every theological dogma’, he states, ‘is: *Deus dixit*’, God has spoken, to the human in *three forms*, as the Word of God that is revealed, written and proclaimed.<sup>147</sup> As the revealed Word of God in its eternal form it is spoken by God to prophets and apostles in Jesus Christ; as written Word of God in its historical form it is attested in Holy Scripture; as the proclaimed Word of God in its present form it is delivered by the Church in its preaching and sacraments.<sup>148</sup> It is after this fashion that Barth first developed his celebrated doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God as early as in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* in 1923/24.

The ‘*Deus dixit*’ signifies ‘self-presentation, self-representation and self-disclosure of God in which God Himself is through and through the *subject* that must, and can only, be discerned by faith, as distinct from the *object* which ‘escapes or transcends the subject’, and all that religious philosophy or philosophical theology have been aspiring to prove.<sup>149</sup> The *Deus dixit*, therefore, actually means ‘the knowledge of God through God and from God’, in which ‘the object becomes the subject.’<sup>150</sup> Barth says that if human beings receive God’s address and know Him in faith it is not on their own initiative, rather is it God’s own work in them. Yet revelation purports that God’s work is done in human beings whose own efforts must end either one way or the other because

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<sup>146</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 10.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. Here he takes over the Latin phrase ‘*Deus dixit*’ originally from the Dutch Reformed theologian, Hermann Bavinck (1854-1921). See 14.

<sup>148</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 88-120.

<sup>149</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 61.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

the *Deus dixit* never ceases to be *Deus dixit* even when they believe, when they think they feel and experience it, and try to speak about God. ‘*God* is the subject even when we hear [H]is Word in the witness of the prophets and apostles.’<sup>151</sup>

Human beings in the knowledge of God, hence, are always the object *subject to* the subject. The modern theologians and philosophers of religion, by contrast, who hold that the revelation of God is ‘the source of the feeling of absolute dependence’, with the result that knowledge of God is but a ‘self-certainty’, presume that apart from the *faith*, the subjectively individual religious experience warrants salvation exempt from the Judgement, and that God can possibly be conceived simply by means of certain existing presuppositions in those who obtain as well as perceive them.<sup>152</sup> They identify knowledge of God with rational activities or inner feelings of the human, as though God’s presence were to be proved *objectively* by general philosophical, even theological, presuppositions, and *subjectively* by particular mysterious inwardness which ascribes to believers a physical organ with relation to God.<sup>153</sup> The failing on the whole is that ‘it makes God an object *without* God’<sup>154</sup> because ‘it believes so little in this *Deus dixit*’,<sup>155</sup> and wholly relies on human efforts. Barth’s rebuke is that to honour such human efforts is to worship ‘an idol’ as well as ‘to deny revelation’, for it forgets the *Deus dixit*, the divine nature in

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>152</sup> For example, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, and Wilhelm Herrmann. See Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 182ff; H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Rumscheidt ed., *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at Its Height* (London: Collins Publisher, 1989), 42-85; McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 49-68.

<sup>153</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 47-48.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 14.

Christ, to which alone honour and worship belong.<sup>156</sup> Only inappropriately and in imagination, as it were, might human beings feel that they themselves are the subjects of what is said if every word they conceive they might, and could, say objectively about God, is not to be again a denial of revelation.<sup>157</sup>

While later in the *Church Dogmatics* II/1, Barth modifies this view by claiming that, in the knowledge of God, God can be human beings' object too, this only occurs when He reveals Himself to human beings to 'be known in the revelation of His Word through the Holy Spirit'.<sup>158</sup> That is to say, God 'enters into the relationship of object to human beings the subject' by whom 'He is considered and conceived'.<sup>159</sup> However, it is important to note that in the object-subject relationship God 'is and remains to [human beings] Another; He is the One 'who is distinct from [them]', and the One who confronts them.<sup>160</sup> Precisely, this Object of faith, by whom human beings as the subject in search of Him is determined, is categorically other than the object of human speculation. In Barth's view, the two-fold concept of God as the *subject* in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* and God as the *object* supplemented in the *Church Dogmatics* consists of the 'real knowledge of God' which 'is concerned with God in His relationship to [humankind], but also in His distinction from [them]'--'the distinction between the knower and the known.'<sup>161</sup>

In introducing the three forms of the Word of God Barth intends to construe a *dialogical dialectic* knowledge of God from the God 'who is

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>158</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 9.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 10.

indestructibly subject, who is knowable but not comprehensible, who is the living, free, and sovereign God.’<sup>162</sup> It is *dialogical* because the *Deus dixit* primarily attested in Holy Scripture and preached in the Church, according to Barth, is not the inconceivable God’s monologue, but His perpetual loving action in the form of *revelation* to human beings in the nature of communication. God’s address and the human’s receipt of and response to it; it is the permanent *vis-à-vis* divine-human encounter on His initiative.<sup>163</sup> It is the Word of grace precisely because it speaks to human beings, and can speak to them, only in and through its worldly form, and because they, including Christians, are and remain sinners (*homo simul justus peccator*).

It is *dialectic* because, unlike the Hegelian syllogism with its deductive synthesis of thesis and antithesis which can never be resolved into a higher synthesis, it is a dialectic understanding of ‘the hiddenness of God in the event of revelation’.<sup>164</sup> It refers to the infinite freedom of God’s twofold action of distinctness and union, of eternity and contingency, and of ‘God’s hidden revelation and revealed hiddenness’ to the end that being *immanent* within the human history and world *ad libitum*, God remains *transcendent* from them *ad infinitum*.<sup>165</sup> This is, in Barth’s own words, ‘the dialectic of revelation and not just any dialectic,...because this is in keeping with the actual course of our knowledge.’<sup>166</sup>

Firstly, in distinguishing the uniqueness of the three *forms* of the Word of

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<sup>162</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, ‘Karl Barth’s First Lectures in Dogmatics: *Instruction in the Christian Religion*,’ in Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, XXVIII.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., XXIX.

<sup>166</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 394.

God in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, Barth highlights the *chronological distinctness* between the three forms, which indicates that the second and the third forms of the Word, Holy Scripture and Christian preaching, are subsequent to the first form, Jesus Christ ‘the objective revelation of God in the incarnation of God’.<sup>167</sup> The first form of the ‘*Deus dixit*’ labelled by Barth as ‘God’s self-revealing in Jesus Christ’ is that speech of God which is exactly like God; it is exactly alike, owing to the fact that it is speech by God. The very fact that God has already spoken allows and encourages, as well as urges and obliges, Christian preachers to speak about Him, and, simultaneously, abolishes all human attempt at speaking about the *conceived* God by autonomous speculation.<sup>168</sup> This form of the Word does not continue to happen in creaturely history because revelation is *in esse* an eternal happening once for all *in* Jesus Christ, or, it should more accurately be said that the revelation *is* Jesus Christ Himself.<sup>169</sup> The Word of God in its second form is Holy Scripture which is that witness of the prophets and apostles that was engendered by their encounter with the *Deus dixit*, by the speech of God to them. As the witness of the prophets and apostles, Holy Scripture is ‘in time as such.’<sup>170</sup> Viewed from this angle, Scripture is precisely a form of the human response to God’s address, as well as a form of that address itself.<sup>171</sup>

The third form of the Word of God is Christian preaching, and as preaching the Word of God does continue to reach its hearers nowadays. It is the present form of the Word. That is to say that through today’s Christian

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 192; 134ff.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 201.



preaching that is rooted in the witness of the prophets and apostles, the ‘*Deus dixit*’ makes itself known to the hearers.<sup>172</sup> It would, however, be a fatal mistake to conclude that human beings are confronted with three separate Words of God. It is one and the identical Word, God speaking to the human in Jesus Christ, which is realised in these three forms. The first form, the revealed Word of God, establishes the two other forms in that both Holy Scripture and the proclamation of the Church, grounded upon Holy Scripture, bear witness to the revealed Word of God.<sup>173</sup> In this point Barth shifts his stress to the *eternal union* of the three forms of God’s Word to the human by expounding in detail the mutual relationship between them in consistency with the ‘Chalcedonian’ and ‘Trinitarian’ patterns.<sup>174</sup>

On account of the contingency of revelation, the human words, Scripture and preaching are ‘qualified’ by their relation to the Word of God in the event of revelation to be the bearers of that revelation.’<sup>175</sup> What has been spoken and disclosed by the two human words is *au fond* the celestial knowledge of God, and those who are equipped with it in faith *alone* are capable of discerning the

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<sup>172</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 338-339.

<sup>173</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 120.

<sup>174</sup> According to Hunsinger: ‘The Chalcedonian pattern, formally speaking, is a pattern of unity (“without separation or division”), differentiation (“without confusion or change”), and asymmetry (the unqualified conceptual precedence of the divine over the human...).’ On the other hand, the Trinitarian pattern is ‘dialectical inclusion...by which the whole is understood to be included in the part without rendering the other parts superfluous.’ (Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 85-86). Cf. chapter one of this thesis n. 91. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 88-124. Although the ‘Chalcedonian’ pattern is applied by Barth for the characterisation of the relation between Jesus Christ’s two natures in *Church Dogmatics* as *asymmetrical*, meaning the divine nature of Christ is conceived as having primacy over his human nature, ‘for they share no common measure or standard of measurement’ (Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 286, n. 1), the relationship between the three forms of the identical *divine* Word of God in character with the Chalcedonian teaching--without confusion or separation--in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* must be conceived as *symmetrical*. The relationship between the three forms of the Word is specified at full length and more neatly in the early chapters of *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, esp. 121.

<sup>175</sup> See McCormack’s excellent analysis in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 340-341.

true God from the others.<sup>176</sup> Thirdly and above all, in Barth's view, in the event of revelation, which 'means disclosure, *apokalypsis*, *phanerosis*, *revelatio*',<sup>177</sup> God willingly and unconditionally *reveals* Himself to human beings. For He 'tears away the veil, the husk, the concealment when he reveals himself' and 'removes the incomprehensibility' by speaking to them.<sup>178</sup> However, 'he does so in such a way and in such a form that in the midst of his revealedness he remains *hidden*';<sup>179</sup> 'in his revelation God is the hidden God'.<sup>180</sup> In construing the dialogical dialectic knowledge of God, Barth resists the idea that God's revelation can possibly be grasped under the thumb of that knowledge. Rather, that knowledge helps humankind to realise that revelation 'cannot be imprisoned in any conceptual scheme.'<sup>181</sup> Insofar as God's revelation is always *hidden* revelation, always grounded in His free grace alone, yet evenly true, God's hiddenness is *revealed* hiddenness and must not be arrogated as identical with the inaccessibility of supposedly transcendental realities.<sup>182</sup>

The crucial point of this dialogical dialectic knowledge of God, therefore, is always the revelation of God's revealed concealment and the coterminous accentuation on the categorical freedom of a gracious God in all relationships with the human and the world that He created.<sup>183</sup> It is only on the solid basis of the dialogical dialectic knowledge of God from God in its threefold form which is distinctive, eternal, and revealed but at the same time united, contingent, and

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<sup>176</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 49.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Trevor Hart, 'The Word, The Words and The Witness: Proclamation as Divine and Human Reality in the Theology of Karl Barth,' *Tyndale Bulletin*, 46.1 (1995), 94-95 [italics mine].

<sup>180</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 135.

<sup>181</sup> Migliore, 'Karl Barth's First Lectures in Dogmatics', XXVIII-XXIX.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, XXIX.

<sup>183</sup> Migliore, 'Karl Barth's First Lectures in Dogmatics', XXIX.

concealed, that Christian preachers *ex officio* illuminate Christian knowledge of God, in accordance to the Word of God demanding *faith* from its recipients--an attitude, gratitude, and willingness which are precisely qualified only with relation to God.<sup>184</sup> In speaking about God, and unfolding Christian knowledge of God, Christian preachers 'make assertions about the *final* truth not merely in existence but above it. They claim to give the profoundest answer to the profoundest human question. They place before the I of the hearers a *Thou* whom they cannot overlook or dissolve or transcend.'<sup>185</sup> Unlike natural knowledge of God needing to be demonstrated, the *Deus dixit* is a '*dicere*' which enlightens and approaches humankind 'in a form of the Word which seeks to be known' as *the* real knowledge of God by its hearers' *obedient hearing* indirectly, from Scripture and proclamation in the Church and 'precisely in faith'.<sup>186</sup>

Barth concludes that the Latin perfect tense '*Deus dixit*' signifies that God not only spoke in the life of Jesus of Nazareth *illic et tunc* but also continues to speak by way of the Scriptures and Christian preaching *hic et nunc*: 'God by His activating, ratifying and fulfilling of the word of the Bible and preaching' lets the *Deus dixit* (revelation) 'come into force again' and thus become the only basis of Christian knowledge of God from beginning to end. <sup>187</sup>

## (II) 'Fides Quaerens Intellectum' and the 'Analogia Fidei'

The method Barth adopts here is '*fides quaerens intellectum*',<sup>188</sup> faith in

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<sup>184</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 46.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>187</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 120.

<sup>188</sup> Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum. Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*. trans. Ian W. Robertson (London: SCM Press, 1960.) *Fides*

search of understanding, which is a logical prolongation from ‘*Credo, ut intelligam*’.<sup>189</sup> The ‘*fides quaerens intellectum*’ means that human thought seeking understanding for the intelligibility of what God reveals and which is believed in faith.<sup>190</sup> Barth does so because he understands that the knowledge of

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*quaerens intellectum* that Barth eagerly emphasises in *Anselm* is the pivotal presupposition which Barth holds in construction of his doctrine of knowledge of God and in re-examination of Anselm’s use of *ratio* applied in *Church Dogmatics*. The premise from which Barth advances his exposition of *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* is Anselm’s other famous dictum that God is ‘*quo maius cogitari nequit*’, God as something beyond which nothing greater can be conceived. ‘By that designation of God’, Torrance comments, ‘Anselm wanted to keep before him the fact that in our knowledge of God we are concerned with One who is exalted absolutely above and beyond us. Before God we do not stand as one being before another being, but as a creature before his Creator, before the ultimate Objectivity which we cannot in any way transcend in our thought, and must never think of transcending.... Understanding God as greater than anything we can conceive is inseparable from a knowledge of the object of faith, and therefore that object would disappear for our knowledge if we displaced this “God” by one of our own imagination, even if that “God” were reached a *via negativa*. God is the very One who reveals himself in such a way as to command us not to imagine a greater than him.’ (Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 184-185.) Vide also Colin E. Gunton, *Being and Becoming: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 117-127; Parker, *Karl Barth*, 69-82; Thomas Edward Provençe, ‘The Hermeneutics of Karl Barth’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980), 86-134; Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15-20.

<sup>189</sup> ‘I believe in order that I might understand’. This is Anselm’s statement of his premise concerning the relationship of faith and reason in *Proslogion* 1 modified from Augustine’s formula *Crede, ut intelligas*, ‘Believe, in order that you might understand’.

<sup>190</sup> As Von Balthasar, Barth himself regards *Anselm* as the revolutionary point of his theological thinking. See *How I Changed My Mind*, ed. John Godsey, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), 42-44; *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 11; Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 93. Yet McCormack questions the validity of seeing Barth’s book on Anselm as a kind of watershed in his development because the conventional differentiation between dialectic and analogy exposes ‘a kind of category mistake, for the two are incommensurate concepts, in that one is to do with method, another with content.’ (Colin Gunton, ‘Bruce McCormack’s *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 49.9 [1996], 483-484.) McCormack comments: ‘The “analogy of faith” refers most fundamentally to a relation of correspondence between an *act* of God and an *act* of a human subject; the act of divine Self-revelation and the human act of faith in which that revelation is acknowledged. More specifically, the analogy which is established in a revelation event is an analogy between God’s knowledge of Himself and human knowledge of Him in and through human concepts and words.’ (*Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 16-17.) However, the structure of Barth’s theology is still dialectical on account that ‘far from representing the abandonment of dialectic, the “analogy of faith” is grounded in...the “dialectic of veiling and unveiling” in revelation. (16; see also 18-20, particularly 18; cf. 269-270) Consequently, McCormack insists: ‘Of course none of this was new. This tendency of thought had governed Barth’s thinking since his break with Hermannian liberalism in 1915.’ He also illustrates Michael Beintker’s words in support of his view: ‘Barth’s placing of the reality before the possibility is the consistent result of his struggle for the thinking “from God to us”, or alternatively, a “viewing things from God’s standpoint”, which has stamped and motivated Barth’s entire theological attitude since the days of *Romans* I.’ (425). A similar viewpoint can be found in Parker’s mind: ‘*Fides Quaerens Intellectum* was not a turning point in Barth’s theological career; rather it represented a crystallization of his thinking which made possible his later work.... “What a task then it is to make a *fresh* beginning once more with Protestantism”. The “method” set out in this book in no way contradicts the particular

the true God can be attained only from God alone. For God, ‘who is *the* Truth and rootstock of every other truth’, has revealed the knowledge of Himself to human beings in the Word that He has spoken to them in His Son Jesus Christ; as the living God.<sup>191</sup> He continues to do so through the prophetic *munus* of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. In that revelation God has unveiled Himself, and continually unveils Himself, as the object of human beings’ knowledge, and it is He who also illumines human beings’ minds via the acts of the Holy Spirit in them, so that they may know God.<sup>192</sup>

Since human beings, in order to keep hold of the knowledge of God, need to be illumined by the Holy Spirit, they can only obtain the knowledge by believing in it, to wit, only by faith. Faith is the presupposition of that knowledge and this entails that the knowledge at issue is always *faith-knowledge*, that is, knowledge that derives from faith in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>193</sup> Faith, therefore, constitutes the starting point of all theological thinking that is merely a repetition and interpretation of the contents of that faith. Thus the human race’s faith and its knowledge is not ‘antithesis’ but, by contrast, the very nature of faith requires knowledge: ‘just because we possess the certainty of faith, we must hunger after the *fidei ratio*’.<sup>194</sup>

Barth realises that human knowledge of God ‘is not philosophical but pneumatic, and therefore *analogical*’, but, this is not an *analogia entis* as if *ens*

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insights of the Reformation but insists on them more rigorously and consistently than the Reformers themselves had done.’ (*Karl Barth*, 81.) Precisely, McCormack is right in pointing out that Von Balthasar misplaces ‘dialectic’ and ‘analogy’ in the same category, which completely invalidates Von Balthasar’s presupposition.

<sup>191</sup> Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 171.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 15ff., 28, 39.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 21.

were a general category, accessible to human reason generally, and comprising not only all creatures but God as well.<sup>195</sup> Rather, the analogical thinking of language of theology is a response to what God reveals; it is the methodological procedure of a theology of faith and grace.<sup>196</sup> In the theology of Barth ‘faith (*credere*) in no doubt precedes knowledge (*intelligere*)’ and, on the other hand, knowledge follows faith, by which human beings are unconditionally bound to the truth of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>197</sup> For Barth, the essential meaning of *fides quaerens intellectum* is to reflect on (think-after [*Nachdenken*], rightly speaking) what has already been professed in the Church,<sup>198</sup> that is to say that the genuine ‘*Intelligere*’ *Dei* ‘comes about by reflection on (thinking-after) the *Credo* that has already been spoken and affirmed.’<sup>199</sup> It is of the utmost significance to notice that in the process of *fides quaerens intellectum*, the ‘faith’ bestowed by God by way of the work of the Holy Spirit simultaneously assumes both the subject and the object.<sup>200</sup> In a word: divine power that makes both human beings’ faith and its object, God’s self-disclosure of Himself, knowable is ‘not the ingenuity of the theologian but the grace of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>201</sup> Accordingly, neither the theologian’s faith nor theology can either ‘search for knowledge’ or ‘employ faith in order to penetrate into God’s being’; and it is in this framework that Barth interprets the meaning of

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<sup>195</sup> Philip J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 42 [italic mine].

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 40.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 170-171.

<sup>201</sup> Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord*, 39.

Anselm's 'proof'.<sup>202</sup> Anselm did not attempt to prove *that* God, who had already known in revelation, exists, nor to lead the human to faith. Rather, he was asking what else we must say about the existence of God, by unpacking the truth of the *Credo*.<sup>203</sup>

Barth regards Anselm's argument, the so-called '*ontological proof*' in *Proslogion*, as a truly theological presentation of the knowledge of God rather than a 'proof' constituted by a *non sequitur*.<sup>204</sup> Any conclusion, therefore, advocating that *God is* based upon 'Anselm's ontological proof', he argues, ought to be considered as 'nonsense on which no more words ought to be wasted.'<sup>205</sup> Nor is it a matter of inferring the existence of God *a priori* from some entity like the Church or the verbally inspired biblical texts; rather, it is an issue of recognising that the words of the formula, 'God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived', have paved the way to think-after God's own thoughts through His self-giving.<sup>206</sup>

Having given this view of God, Barth has to amplify the terms of reference of the idea of revelation in a dynamic way, so as to exhibit the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity to the matter in which he hopes to form and expand his idea of revelation.<sup>207</sup> In lieu of the Hegelian *epistemological* postulate, 'God's threefold way of *knowing* Himself', Barth discovers 'in *Anselm* an *ontological*

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<sup>202</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 433.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>204</sup> Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 171.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 16. Cf. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 102f, 39-42; Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 30, 64, 78-79, 90, 127, 222, 226, 276, 331-332, 359, 364ff., 393ff., 415-416, 497-498; J. A. Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 24.1 (1971), 8.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, quoting Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 296.

principle, God's threefold way of *being* Himself'.<sup>208</sup> In revelation, in comparison with the Revealer who reveals, the human who receives is relatively *passive*.<sup>209</sup> When the human is invited to a 'fellowship with Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel, the capacity to conceive as such is God's *gift*, the effect of faith ingrained by Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ'.<sup>210</sup> The Holy Spirit is thus distinctly established 'when Barth breaks the analytic statement--God reveals Himself as the Lord--into the components; Revealer, revelation (*revelatio*) and revealedness (*revelatum*) and states that the common factor in all three terms is the notion of unveiling--of *self*-unveiling, *self*-impartation, the making known of something hitherto hidden from sight.'<sup>211</sup> Here Barth seeks to safeguard the Revealer in His revelation from the destructive influence of sin. 'As the Revealer God remains "an ultimate mystery" and His threefold way of being Himself (Revealer; Revelation; and Revealedness) He "gives Himself to man entirely...in giving Himself" and thereby remains God.'<sup>212</sup> This threefoldness which focuses on the revelation manifested in *the person of Jesus*, highlights the position of the Incarnation in Barth at this stage.<sup>213</sup>

As what has been discussed in the first chapter of the present thesis, Barth fiercely attacks the *analogia entis* yet has never wished to discard totally the positivity and feasibility of the idea of analogy in opposition to the *analogia entis*. Rather, he concedes that analogy 'forms the point at which God and the creature meet', the *creaturely media* whereby they 'reach agreement, the basis of

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Barth's views with reference to the proper freedom of human agency in the revelation of God will be discussed in next section.

<sup>210</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth', 9.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. 9-10.

<sup>213</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 43.



their dealing with one another' inasmuch that God's attributes may partly be known to His creature.<sup>214</sup> Therefore, Barth does not simply call a halt at the denial of the legitimacy of the *analogia entis* in Christian knowledge of God. Further to it, Barth posits an alternative to it on the ground of Paul's teaching, the *analogia fidei*, in *Romans* 12: 6.<sup>215</sup> *Analogia fidei*, as Barth interprets it, 'posits an analogy between a human action (faith) and a divine action (grace)' only on the basis that there never be ontological commonness in 'being' between the human being and the divine Being.<sup>216</sup>

Sinful human beings are incapable of obtaining faith except by way of the divinely bestowed grace rather than by nature, 'not even hidden nature, nor natural grace, but grace in the strict sense, the grace of reconciliation'.<sup>217</sup> That is to say that faith, namely, 'the mediating term with reference to the analogy...conceived not as "being" but as "miracle"' is firmly and exclusively underlain by grace.<sup>218</sup> In other words, Barth characterises the conformity of human beings' knowledge of God to the existing actuality and truth of God and the conformity of the Word of God preached in the Church to the Word of God in itself, and as such, a conformity achieved merely in faith and hence merely by grace, as the *analogia fidei*.<sup>219</sup> On this account, identifying himself with the justified sinner, Barth would not have dissented from Henry Chavannes' criticism that Barth's denial of the *analogia entis* betrays 'his [Barth's] inability

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<sup>214</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 397-398.

<sup>215</sup> *Analogia fidei* is also called *analogia gratiae* and *analogia relationis* in *Church Dogmatics*, III/1 with respect to the divine grace and the *imago Dei* in human beings. See a more detailed expression of Barth in this regard in *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 243-244.

<sup>216</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 283, n. 2.

<sup>217</sup> Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed., Dietrich Braun, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 373.

<sup>218</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 283 n. 2.

<sup>219</sup> Chavannes, *The Analogy between God and the World in Saint Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 198.

to conceive a natural knowability of God from creation in Jesus Christ.’<sup>220</sup>

It is also of great significance that, against the contamination and invasion by the *analogia entis*, Barth affirms the *analogia fidei* as the safeguard of ‘Evangelical faith’ and thus of the Protestant Church, and *vice versa*. For Barth the *analogia fidei* from the Holy Spirit, manifesting the incarnation of the Word of God in the light of the witness of the prophets and the apostles attested in the Bible, is God’s free grace. ‘[I]ndirect self-presentation in creaturely reality’<sup>221</sup> is the act of a loving God in order to prevent human beings from fatal accident attributed to the *analogia entis*.<sup>222</sup> On account of the love and grace of God Barth is bound to assert: ‘There is no *analogia entis* but only an *analogia fidei*.’<sup>223</sup>

### (III) *Revelation as Faith-Knowledge of God*

In searching for a truly theological method Barth appears to be an iconoclast of human self-satisfaction with, and self-confidence in, certain paradigms of the so-called scientific theology of envisaging and speaking about God, the would-be intellectual development in theology, in order to safeguard God’s supreme sovereignty and transcendency.<sup>224</sup> He does not think at all that they are safeguarded either in Modern liberalism or Roman Catholicism, the two major adversaries of Barth. Quite the reverse, he is aware of the danger that, at

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 166. He insists, ‘When Paul speaks of a βλέπειν δι’ ὁσόπτρου in 1 Cor. 13: 12 the addition ἐν αἰνίγματι should be noted. He is pointing out that we have here a twofold indirectness of vision. First the Word of God meets us in a form that is to be distinguished from its content, and secondly the form as such is an enigma, a concealing of the Word of God.’

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 437.

<sup>224</sup> Chavannes, *The Analogy between God and the World in Saint Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, 199.

the disposal of liberal and Catholic theologies, the knowledge of the sovereign and transcendent God has actually slid down the slippery slope by human manipulation.<sup>225</sup> For, as has been shown in the preceding chapter, on the one hand, liberal Protestantism destroys it by subjecting the Word of God to human civilisation and subjective experience, by which it tries to frame ‘its prolegomena on general anthropology in order to prepare a purely human possibility’.<sup>226</sup>

On the other hand, Roman Catholicism ruins it by objectifying the Word of God by dint of a preconceived *analogia entis*. While it searches for a groundwork in the Bible, tradition, the Church, and the faith of the Church, it does so in such a way that in the end the possibility is still a human one.<sup>227</sup> This accounts for Barth’s fervent endeavour to find a way to locate the possibility of prolegomena between these two extremes.<sup>228</sup> With him, prolegomena to dogmatics never become the groundwork dogmatics by human design *a priori*, i.e., either by an abstract philosophical enterprise or by theoretical criteria or by the help of certain special theological technicalities, as though they underwrote the possibility or conceivability of Christian faith. In lieu of depending on any human scheme, prolegomena to dogmatics are ‘part of’ dogmatics *per se*; attempting, insofar as is possible, to present ‘the rules or fragments of rules’<sup>229</sup> followed in the Church, and thus to obey the ‘criterion of the priority’ of

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 36-39.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 40f.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., I/1, 31-36. For Barth, dogmatic prolegomena is imperative because it is ‘our name for the introductory part of dogmatics in which our concern is to understand its particular way of knowledge.... By prolegomena to dogmatics (*praecognitia Theologiae*...), we understand the attempt to give an explicit account of the particular way of knowledge taken in dogmatics, or, as we might also say, of the particular point from which we are to look, think and judge in dogmatics.’ (Ibid., I/1, 25.)

<sup>229</sup> Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1992), 45.

Christian discourse as her task.<sup>230</sup> He constantly insists that God must certainly be the sovereign subject of theology (dogmatics) inasmuch as He is its sovereign object.<sup>231</sup> In his further development this is expressed in the phrase: 'Jesus Christ is the sole noetic principle because He is the sole ontic content of theology.'<sup>232</sup>

In the *analogia fidei* to which Barth refers, God creates the event of revelation between human thought and His truth; it is always and solely *His* act. The analogy is never grasped by human beings. Human knowledge, in so far as the human is its subject, never attains in any way to God. If it does, it is only in so far as God Himself is its direct subject. At this point one particular claim of his theology does break imperiously before us: God is known only by God. Barth rightly pinpoints that theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, that it is the science of faith. Faith is a movement into the world of eternal life which results in a penetration, apprehension, or in short, in an understanding (*intellectus*) by the human mind of the object of faith; theology is thus *fides quaerens intellectum*. 'In faith we can have knowledge of [God], and speak of [Him].'<sup>233</sup> It owes its origin to God's illumination to human beings through faith--through a pious and loving faith. Knowledge of God's existence therefore follows His activity through faith, as Barth puts it, *esse sequitur operari*.<sup>234</sup> Theology is a participation in God's own knowledge through self-communication in faith. It is an illumination and participation *given to the human*, and hence a knowledge

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>231</sup> Colm O'Grady, *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth: Dialogue with Karl Barth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 62, 64-67.

<sup>232</sup> Colm O'Grady, *The Church in Catholic Theology: Dialogue with Karl Barth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969), 5.

<sup>233</sup> Karl Barth, *God in Action: Theological Addresses*, trans. E. G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 3.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

which is His. This participated knowledge then *quaerit intellectum* through its human receptacle, that is, through the human's intelligence. It seeks to reproduce itself in human knowledge. Theology is this becoming incarnate of divine knowledge.<sup>235</sup>

Theology, as a consequence, is not simply the product of a light placed in the human mind, nor is it the act of God knowing Himself through human thoughts and words. It is rather the product of the human mind itself, and the act of the human under the influence of God's act. As such, theology must by no means be identified with God's knowledge of Himself.<sup>236</sup> Finite minds and concepts are incapable of adequately expressing the infinite. There will always be the element of analogy in humankind's attempt to conceive God and His revelation. Their concepts and words will always point beyond themselves to the reality which they indicate, in spite of the fact that they do not adequately grasp or express it.<sup>237</sup>

On the basis of what has already been claimed in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* and *Anselm*, 'Barth now calls readers' attention to the adjusted focus on the *coherent* characteristic of the *threefold* form of the Word, i.e., the active and initiative performance of God within it recognised and accepted in *faith*', by mentioning his 'little book on Anselm of Canterbury': *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, and also the replacement of 'Christian' with 'Church' *Dogmatics* in the preface of the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>238</sup> Inasmuch not only as 'to set a good example of restraint in the lighthearted use of the great word

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<sup>235</sup> Cf. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 183-184.

<sup>236</sup> O'Grady, *The Church in Catholic Theology*, 9.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 10.

“Christian” against which [Barth has] protested’ but also ‘to show that from the very outset dogmatics is not a free science. It is bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful.’<sup>239</sup>

In adjusting his focus Barth actualises what has already been mentioned in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* that, for the sake of faith, preaching is not merely the *te,loj* but also the *avrch*, of dogmatics<sup>240</sup> by inverting the order of the three forms of the Word in the first chapter of the *Church Dogmatics*, beginning with ‘the Word of God preached’ today, undergirded by ‘the Word of God written’ yesterday and ‘the Word of God revealed’ eternally, which ‘becomes the actuality of revelation and faith.’<sup>241</sup> The Word preached is the ‘miracle of revelation and faith...,when proclamation is for us not just human willing and doing characterised in some way but also and primarily and decisively God’s own act, when human talk about God is for us not just that, but also primarily and decisively God’s own speech.’<sup>242</sup> Holy Scripture, like preaching, becomes the Word of God whenever God speaks His Word through it. To put it another way, it is formally the words of human beings and merely a channel through which the *Deus dixit* is delivered to human beings. Particularly, as far as Holy Scripture is concerned, Barth states that it ‘becomes God’s Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God’s Word the little word “is” refers to its being in this becoming.’<sup>243</sup>

In the strictest sense, the Word of God is the living Lord Jesus Christ

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<sup>239</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, xi-xiii.

<sup>240</sup> Cf. Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 23ff; McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 342.

<sup>241</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 89.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

Himself speaking to human beings through the testimony which both Holy Scripture and Christian preaching bear to Him, and revealing to them the truth of God as embodied in the unity of His person and saving work. All revelation must be treated as revealing and conditioned by the work of God's revelation, because revelation actually conforms to the person of Jesus Christ and to the reconciling redemption fulfilled in Him. However, the *Word revealed*, which '*has happened* once and for all time in the historical event of Jesus Christ, must always be entitled a prior and determinative position above and beyond' the *Word written* and the *Word preached*, which must ever again *become* the Word of God.<sup>244</sup> Although, as McCormack observes, such an inversion of the order of the three forms does not 'fundamentally alter the basic understanding which is already set forth...in the Göttingen Prolegomena; they merely provide further concretisation' of the dialogical dialectic knowledge of God,<sup>245</sup> it does pinpoint Barth's modification of dialectic thinking to *fides (quaerens intellectum)* thinking as the paramount methodology of his theology (dogmatic thinking) thereafter.<sup>246</sup> This is something Barth takes over directly from Anselm: 'As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.'<sup>247</sup> This means that theology, including dogmatics, can happen only in the Church as an act of *faith*; outside the range of which people may still talk about God, but not in relation to the true Object which requires people's faith and obedience.

Barth implies here the teaching that the *opera* of the Spirit upon us and in

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 343.

<sup>246</sup> In the *Church Dogmatics* the word 'theology' and 'dogmatics' are more often than not reciprocal terms.

<sup>247</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 3.

us prunes from us the supposition of any other possibility of human beings for God than that which we have in believing in and in obeying the '*Deus dixit*' in the communion of the Holy Spirit.<sup>248</sup> In no circumstances can the *Deus dixit* 'penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it.'<sup>249</sup> Human beings, therefore, on their own cannot co-operate with the Word of God and with that faith thereby and therein the Word is known at their disposal as with a capital sum. This means that Christian revealed knowledge of God cannot be attained in abstraction from the Word of God to which we can only respond in faith and obedience. For the *Deus dixit*, on the one hand, is grace, the promise, and the gospel in the eyes of God which postulate acceptance in faith; yet, on the other hand, it is judgement, the demand, and the law in the eyes of the human which postulates receipt in obedience. <sup>250</sup> Accordingly, faith is by no means mechanically nor naturalistically self-evident, rather is it a miracle.<sup>251</sup> However, Barth also asserts that faith with obedience, 'a knowing and a doing' is a thoroughly *human experience*.<sup>252</sup> It is actually *their* faith, inasmuch as they believe and accept the *Word* of God as the Word of *God* by their own free will and in obedience to God's will as a Word from God that is addressed to them and concerns them intimately and decisively.<sup>253</sup> Barth argues that what takes place in faith is that acknowledgement of God's Word, that can become a human act and experience. If it is carried into effect not by itself but by the Word of God

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<sup>248</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 160f.

<sup>249</sup> Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 191.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.



acknowledged, we can and must now make the positive statement that in faith human beings have actual experience of the Word of God, ‘and no *finitum non capax infiniti*, no *peccator non capax verbi divini*, can now prevent us from taking this statement seriously with all that it involves.’<sup>254</sup>

It becomes quite apparent that Barth’s answer to the epistemological conundrum of the knowability of the Word of God is that it becomes knowable as God unveils Himself, and renders Himself knowable through faith, the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in humankind.<sup>255</sup> The real and positive meaning of the knowledge of God is ‘obedience to God.’ This obedience of faith consists in the fact that by the divine work of the Holy Spirit. In accordance with Barth, the *Deus dixit* which is obeyed and accepted in faith, is itself none other than the living God Himself, and thus the only derivation of Christian knowledge of God *as such*. For the God who endows human beings with faith is the God who can only be known by faith that seeks *revealed*, rather than natural, knowledge of God.<sup>256</sup> Precisely, Barth’s doctrine of the knowledge of God leaves no space for any kind of natural theology. Although Barth does not deny that there can be natural knowledge of God, he insists and purports that human beings can never resort to other media as a foundation, in substitute for self-revelation of God in Christ, for the knowledge of God.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 237-238.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 188ff.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN THE THEOLOGY OF**  
**CHOAN-SENG SONG**

**I. The Background of Song's Theology**

*(I) The Genesis and Nature of Asian Theology*

Song's theology came into being in the early 1970s, when the so-called Asian theology was flourishing. The emergence of Asian theology is in indissoluble connection with the Asian *Sitz im Leben*. Its primary responsibility, according to the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, in the collection of his *mélanges* published as *Waterbufflo Theology*, 'begins by raising issues', which take place both in the Asian context and in the churches.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, among Asian theologians, the two major 'outstanding issues' ruthlessly shadowing most of the Asians day after day and which will 'increasingly engage churches and Christians in their life and work' are *socio-political (economic) suffering* and *religious pluralism*.<sup>2</sup>

Christian mission to Asia has long since been regarded by the majority of Asian people as part of Western colonialism under the cloak of religious faith. Most of them, not excluding Christians themselves, believe that Christianity is only a by-product of colonialism. It invades Asian countries accompanied by an urban lifestyle, a plantation capitalist economy, liberal democratic polity, individualistic ethics, pragmatist axiology, and the 'outlook of a sophisticated and racially conscious Western civilisation'<sup>3</sup> in which the people of Asia are

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<sup>1</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 3; 20.

<sup>2</sup> Mackie, 'God's People in Asia,' 217.

<sup>3</sup> Lakshman Wickremesinghe, 'Christianity in the Context of Other faiths' in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology--Papers from the Asian Theological Conference, January 7-20, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka*, ed. Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll: Orbit

miserably dehumanised under the unjust socio-economic and political power structure possessed by either autocrat or oligarch. Although colonialism in its overt form has ostensibly come to an end since 1 July 1997 when Hong Kong was handed back to China, its negative influences are by no means entirely rooted out; colonialism is still affecting and permeating all aspects of life in the disguised forms of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

By neo-colonialism the Asian people mean the dominance, in its covert forms, executed by the old colonial and imperialist powers where the 'metropolitan power exercises control within the context of the nominal independence of the people affected rather than by an outright colonial administration imposed on them.'<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the colonialisised country was granted independence only under an agreement to accept the traditional economic relationship with the colonial government who, for their own benefit but at the expense of others, continually took great care to ensure that power was only handed over to the dominant classes, often a combination of an autocrat and a consortium, on whom they could rely. Interventionism of this kind not only aggravated disparity between the rich stratum and the poor, but also degraded the whole social framework in terms of unemployment and gross economic exploitation which have been constitutionalised by government through a parliament possessing illicitly vested interests. These are the material realities of social life in most Asian countries which inevitably cause suppression of

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Books, 1980), 28.

<sup>4</sup> K. Matthew Kurian, 'Socio-Economic and Political Reality in Asia,' in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 63, quoting D. Boone Schirmer, 'The Philippine Conception and Gestation of a Neo-Colony,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 5 (1975), 53.

human rights and political repression.<sup>5</sup>

In reaction against the Christian missionary enterprise as part of the impact of Western imperial expansion, which marginalises local cultures and distorts social relations, leaders of indigenous religions have emerged to revitalise both religious visions and social ideologies as a basis for personal fulfilment, cultural renaissance, and social reconstruction in order to establish a 'sense of national self-identity'. As a result of this reaction, Christians have been isolated from societies as betrayers of their aboriginal cultural inheritance. Therefore Christians in Asia are impelled to adopt a new attitude of 'Christ-centred reciprocity' towards other faiths and their believers<sup>6</sup> by relating their Christ-centred vision to the thoughts and values of other religions at the risk of syncretising Christianity. While they are completely committed to Jesus Christ, they also appreciate the positive elements in other religions for their own worth, as they realise how different religious insights and values can enrich historical Christianity.<sup>7</sup> It is hoped that this new attitude can offer fresh perspectives to lead Christians to re-assess and appreciate the value and contribution of other religions in the light of the purpose of the creation and salvation of God. Insofar as they have no doubt that 'God's prevenient love operates everywhere, at all times, in each person and group, but uniquely in biblical history centred in Jesus Christ.' Lakshman Wickremesinghe, for example, points out that Jesus Christ is unique in four different ways because of His person, work, the biblical witness, and His church. He argues:

He is unique not merely because, in the Nazarene, God is expressed

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<sup>5</sup> Kurian, 'Socio-Economic and Political Reality in Asia', 70.

<sup>6</sup> Wickremesinghe, 'Christianity in the Context of Other Faiths', 31.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 29.

from within a human nature brought to moral perfection, but also because the Son of God embodied in him to the fullest extent possible to the receptive capacity of human nature. His work is unique not only because it is fully effective to secure salvation for us personally, but also because God has set Him in the world and among us, as the inescapable saving Presence before whom all persons and situations are accountable. The Scriptures which testify Him are unique because they record the normative, though not sole, interpretation of God's dealings with humankind. The church which derives from Him is unique because it is the appointed, though not sole, sphere which expresses and makes effectual the kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup>

In Asian theology, Jesus Christ may be the unique model in the knowledge of God, the *best media* or even the very *axis*, but He is *not* the only objective revelation in the special *Heilsgeschichte* wherein God makes Himself known. Alongside Jesus Christ there are other salvation histories 'with their own range of effectiveness and autonomous contribution to the salvation history of humankind.'<sup>9</sup> Other religious 'saviours and saints' should be recognised and honoured too; their scriptures and community life provide insights, values, and spiritual authenticity available and applicable for enriching the thought and life of the visible church.<sup>10</sup> For the aim of the providence of God is not to absorb believers in other faiths, who also possess their 'relative autonomy', into the visible church.<sup>11</sup> Rather, they will autonomously bring their special gifts into the kingdom of God at the *eschaton*. Asian Christians are thus required to draw others into their uniting siblinghood from all religio-cultures to the kingdom of God 'as a foretaste of and a testimony before all nations'.<sup>12</sup>

These two common denominators in most Asian countries--politico-economic oppression and multifaceted religiosity--must never

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 32

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

be overlooked by those who concern themselves with the Asian context of practising theology. As Aloysius Pieris notes, they have been ‘two inseparable realities which, in their interpretation, constitute what might be designated as the Asian context and which is the matrix of any theology that is truly Asian.’<sup>13</sup> That is to say, to be *bona fide* Asian ‘theology must be immersed in our historico-cultural situation and grow out of it. A theology that emerged from the people’s struggle for liberation would spontaneously formulate itself in religio-cultural idioms of the people.’<sup>14</sup> Hence in methodology and in expression, the nature of Asian theology is always ‘people-centred and radical in concern’,<sup>15</sup> as though it were no more than anthropology. As Song claims: ‘It is we human beings who are the problem for theology. Problematic humanity is the subject of theology. The business of theology is to see how God makes this problematic humanity less problematic. For this reason *theo*-logy must be *anthropo*-logy. The logos of *theos* is the logos of *anthropos*.’<sup>16</sup> Any *theological* attempt to confront Asian religions must take into account political oppression and economic poverty, and any *ideological* programme to uproot Asia’s socio-political (economic) suffering must not disregard its religiosity either.<sup>17</sup>

In consequence, a real Asian theology ‘must ultimately be the work of the Asian poor, who are struggling for *full humanity*.... This does not exclude the so-called specialists in theology. With their knowledge they can complement

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<sup>13</sup> Aloysius Pieris, ‘Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines’ in *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, 75-76.

<sup>14</sup> Fabella ed., ‘The Final Statement’ in *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, 157.

<sup>15</sup> John C. England ed., *Living Theology in Asia* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Name*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Pieris, ‘Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation’, 76.

the theologising of the grassroots people. But their theologising becomes authentic only when rooted in the history and struggle of the poor and the oppressed.’<sup>18</sup> In a sense Asian theology, like all others, is a *local* theology which springs from a particular point of history in the dynamic interaction of the Gospel, Church and cultures. ‘It grows out of and serves, national or regional Christian traditions and retains the marks of a unique cultural experience. This can be thought to undermine the universality of the Christian Gospel, only by ignoring the particularity and historicity of God’s dealing with Israel, and in the life of Jesus Himself.’ Those who reject the regionalised character of theological construction are often in fact imposing their own formulations as in some sense normative for all others.’<sup>19</sup>

## (II) *The Task of Asian Theology*

Various as they are, the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama points out that the issues the Asian theologian intends to raise within the sphere of the churches can be capsulated in two major categories. Firstly, how can the Gospel and the unique identity of Jesus Christ be identified within Asian cultural heritage and historical experience (colonialism, ethnic conflicts and enrichment, economic poverty, and so on)?<sup>20</sup> How then can the authority of the Word of God be affirmed by relating human situations depicted in the Bible there and then to those in Asia here and now in light of the relationship between the unity and interdependence of the Church and the Asians in this interrelated world?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Fabella ed., ‘The final Statement’, 157 [italics mine].

<sup>19</sup> England ed., *Living Theology in Asia*, 3 [revised].

<sup>20</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 106-108.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 108-110.

Secondly, how can dialogue be initiated and the Christian faith reconciled with religious faiths and ideologies without slipping down the slope of syncretism?<sup>22</sup> To put it more briefly, how are ‘men and women surviving, humanly and Christianly, where many are not?’<sup>23</sup> How do Asian Christians ‘reflect and find in the Bible, prayer and fellowship, strength for the struggle and perspective for larger human purpose?’<sup>24</sup> Face to face with these abiding challenges Asian Christians are impelled in one way or another to ‘come to terms with their cultural particularity and their isolation from their cultural inheritance in the post-colonial age.’<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the inescapable encounter between Asian Christians and their living realities will eventually lead to ‘creative adoption and naturalisation of features and insights from other religions’, to ‘interreligious sharing of spiritual experiences and to interreligious cooperation for the liberation of the oppressed’ in order to integrate the Gospel and their life situations.<sup>26</sup> Such ingrained problems and malaise can never be eradicated or released, nor can the goal of integration be completed simply ‘by digesting Augustine, Barth and Rahner’ or even the reformers.<sup>27</sup> For Song sees that what

St. Augustine has told us in his *City of God* as he pondered deeply upon the fall of Rome at the hands of barbarians from the north may or may not contain an answer for us as we try to decipher the meaning of the shah of Iran’s deposition by the angry masses once considered to be his

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 110-114.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 115-117

<sup>24</sup> England ed., *Living Theology in Asia*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Mackie, ‘God’s People in Asia,’ 217-218.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>27</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 3; 20. Cf. also viii. ‘I also decided that I have not really understood *Summa Theologiae* and *Church Dogmatics* until I am able to use them for the benefit of the farmers. My theology in northern Thailand must began with the need of the farmers and not with the great thought developed in *Summa Theologiae* and *Church Dogmatics*.... The reason is simple: God has called me to work here in northern Thailand, not in Italy or Switzerland.’



meek and submissive royal subject. As we watch in awe the rising of peoples to demand their rights, what Martin Luther, the great reformer, did in connection with peasants' war grieves us more than it inspires us. And as we look around us and seek to understand the piety and religions that have shaped society in Hong Kong, in Taiwan, and in other Chinese communities in various parts of the world, we have to admit that what Karl Barth said about religions as unbelief is a hindrance rather than a help to us. The reason is very simple. We are facing situations quite different from what St Augustine, Martin Luther, or Karl Barth had to face.<sup>28</sup>

The answers provided by these Christian thinkers do not automatically apply to the new sets of questions with which Asian theologians must come to grips. They recognise in the context within which Asian theology must be done that the challenge to Christian theology of the two pervasive aspects of Asian realities, namely, religiousness and poverty, is markedly different from the contexts of the missionaries, both in a cultural and a socio-political sense. Nor do they deem the Asian context itself homogeneous.<sup>29</sup> Based upon the different setting of lives in Asia and the West, Asian theologians set forth two premises for Asian theology: (1) that 'the current Western-based and Western-oriented theology is no longer meaningful to many Asian Christians', and (2) that to be significant to the contemporary Asians, 'theology must be based on the concrete experience of the people and the concrete realities of their continent.' Thus the 'articulation of the faith response must spring from the people's lives and struggle, their joys, pains, hopes, and frustration within their given context.'<sup>30</sup> Hence, Veitch argues, Asian theology can be deemed a theological reflection which

points to the possible existence, or potential creation, of a theology shaped, moulded and related to a specific historical context, by particular

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<sup>28</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Mackie, 'God's People in Asia,' 240.

<sup>30</sup> Virginia Fabella, 'An Introduction' in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, 4.

socio-cultural and religious factors (religious here includes philosophical) so that the emerging form of this theology differs in emphasis and possibly in structure, though not necessarily in content, from other kinds of theology--e.g. western theology in whether its continental or American cultural form.<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, as John England observes, the task of Asian theology 'consists of a struggle for fuller humanity in socio-political as well as psycho-spiritual aspects'<sup>32</sup>--'a fuller human existence and...self-determination and the self-creation of their own destinies',<sup>33</sup> that have been truncated by centuries of colonialism and a more recent neo-colonialism. Such a theology is not so much to create for Asian Christians, a formula of who God has been, as an expression of the dilemmas in which God is now to be found. Its over-ruling concern is 'pastoral and missional',<sup>34</sup> in the sense that the present dilemma facing prophetic and embattled minorities is what determine its response, that is, 'the confessing of the Gospel in the concrete life situation of their people.'<sup>35</sup> Not unexpectedly, England argues, the knowledge of God they obtain from the realities in their particular society 'replaces many of the *loci* of Western theology as the beginning of reflection'; and the '*mode* of their response in theology as action is 'one of contestation in situations of tension and conflict, by which social transformation and authentic spirituality are striven for.'<sup>36</sup>

Theological reflection of this kind will be Asian therefore, not on account of the characteristics shared with other parts of the region, far less on the score of the nationality or geographical location of the theologian. Rather will it be

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<sup>31</sup> J. A. Veitch, 'Is An Asian Theology Possible?' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 28.1 (1975), 27 [italic mine].

<sup>32</sup> Fabella ed., 'The Final Statement', 153.

<sup>33</sup> Kurian, 'Socio-Economic and Political Reality in Asia', 60.

<sup>34</sup> England ed., *Living Theology in Asia*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2.

Asian, and a witness to the one Lord, in so far as it assists the unique incarnation of the Gospel in a local Asian context.<sup>37</sup> Such theology, according to John England, ‘is forced from a man or woman, or from a community, as they try to find sense and hope in the anguish and turmoil confronting them’. In that it is not concerned with how to uphold a Christian tradition but with ‘how to sustain an allegiance to biblical justice and love in circumstances of conflict’. Nor is it concerned with the detailed elucidation of certain cultural or national characteristics, but ‘with the preservation of a people’s selfhood and identity, where this is being threatened.’<sup>38</sup>

Veitch points out, extrinsically, as far as the *form* and *method* is concerned it is a ‘*theology from below*’, a theology that enters upon the realities encountering the Asian communities. It is a ‘*theology of religious experience*’, in that the pivot of the resurrection of Jesus as the context for biblical faith is therein highlighted.<sup>39</sup> It is also a ‘*theological interpretation of the religious life of man*’ that contextualises the Christian’s talking about God and His revelation to human beings in the man Jesus Christ’.<sup>40</sup> Its nature is ‘*ecumenical*’, in the sense that a fresh and distinct vision is introduced to the tasks of theological deliberation which has consequential implications for theology as a whole.<sup>41</sup> It is of help to locate discussion on God into its befitting situation; a ‘global or universal context which is the theatre in which the presence of God can be perceived and encountered by all men.’<sup>42</sup> Intrinsically,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>39</sup> Veitch, ‘Is An Asian Theology Possible?’ 42.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 43.

however, its *content* consists of the theologian's personal involvement in, engagement with and exposure to actual life-conditions of suffering and of struggle posterior to his or her contemplation and reception of existing realities in order to relate thoughts and experiences both to each other and to the larger, human perspective. It also includes reflection, which relates the life and teaching of Jesus and of the Hebrew prophets, to concrete incident and local community.<sup>43</sup>

The task of Asian theology therefore can be summed up, in Veitch's words, as 'a way of talking about God in Asian context, which is created out of the Christian interpretation and appreciation of the living faith as authentic methods of experiencing the divine, and as they can be theologically interpreted in the light of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead'.<sup>44</sup> It is thus the theological enquiry of the Christian confession '*Jesus Christ is Lord* as understood in the light of the resurrection of Jesus.'<sup>45</sup> It is also 'the theological interpretation of the living faiths and the various claims made about the nature of the divine self-disclosure, and the subsequent mapping out of salvation as the way in which human beings are reconciled to God the ultimate religious reality, thus realising His own identity as a human being, *and* reconciled with others, thus realising His solidarity, togetherness, and neighbourliness with others in society.'<sup>46</sup>

Thus the common and overriding concern shared among Asian Christians is to relate their Christian faith to the *Sitz im Leben* in diversified Asian contexts.

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<sup>43</sup> England ed., *Living Theology in Asia*, 7-8.

<sup>44</sup> Veitch, 'Is An Asian Theology Possible?' 41.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 42. Cf. Mackie, 'God's People in Asia', 230-231; Wickremesinghe, 'Christianity in the Context of Other faiths', 33; 'The Final Statement', 157, 159-160.

Having experienced and pondered over the genesis, nature, and content of theology, Asian theologians have come to realise that every form of theological construction is culturally conditioned. Accordingly, aside from a critical appraisal of the so-called 'traditional theology' developed in the West and imported to Asia, there has been an enthusiastic acceleration of contextual theology which is expected to answer the actual questions that people in Asia are desperately asking nowadays in the midst of transforming social and political situations. They consider that such a concern and pursuance of contextual theology can be brought into effect and achieved partly by Christians' participation in socialist reconstruction and revolutionary change that will provide theological and ideological critiques for the needs of their community.<sup>47</sup> In order to formulate and do their *own* contextual theology most Asian theologians, though not all, unanimously agree on the slogan that Asian-oriented 'subjectivity and contextuality are the measure of all things';<sup>48</sup> that is to say, even though a handful of them may have found it inappropriate and tried to move beyond it,<sup>49</sup> 'contextualisation' is both *the* method and the criterion for Asian theology.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> England ed., *Living Theology in Asia*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Carver T. Yu, 'The Principle of Relativity as a Conceptual Tool in theology' in *Science and Theology: Questions at the Interface*, eds. Murray Rae, Hilary Regan and John Stenhouse (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 180.

<sup>49</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, for example, considers that contextualisation unrealistically presumes the Christian Gospel 'as a pure and unalloyed substance' 'without challenging the gender, racial, religious, and cultural biases' implanted in the Christian Scriptures and doctrines ('Introduction' to *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah [Maryknoll: Orbit Books, 1994], 4.).

<sup>50</sup> Shoki Coe (also known as C. H. Hwang), 'Contextualising Theology' in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Wm. Barth. Eerdmans, 1976), 19-24; Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 20-15; Fabella, 'An Introduction', 4; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualisation--Meanings, method and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989); Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbit Books, 1994), 21-22; Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?: The Quest for An Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1997), 61-122.

### (III) *The Principle of Contextualisation*

In the rapid expansion of the Western missionary movement in the Nineteenth century, the concept of 'indigenisation' was developed whereby Western missionaries expected to transplant *totally* the changeless Gospel into the static and generally primitive cultures of non-Christians. Nevertheless, as has been mentioned, the failure to indigenise completely has caused the permanence of colonialism and the germination of a ghetto mentality among Christians. Since the Second World War, the rise of nationalism, the overthrow of Western colonialism, and the suffusion of political revolution, as well as, concurrently, the explosion of human knowledge, science, technology, materialism, and secular humanism which permeate all modern societies have resulted in crises of faith, and called into question the adequacy and validity of indigenisation. Gerald H. Anderson explains the needs of the Church for contextualisation owing to the bewilderment and isolation of the Asian Christians from their communal life. He points out that 'Christians have tended toward a ghetto mentality among themselves.'<sup>51</sup> And Christian churches in Asia, as Gerald Anderson says, 'has been more like glue than leaven',<sup>52</sup> because they 'have been preoccupied with their own existence and organisation, and correspondingly they have fallen behind in prophetic concern for the social relevance and outreach of the Gospel into the mainstream task of social transformation and nation-building'.<sup>53</sup> According to Anderson's own observation,

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<sup>51</sup> Gerald H. Anderson, 'Introduction' to *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

[p]art of the reason for this isolation from national life has been a minority consciousness among many Christians, with an accompanying sense of security (and perhaps superiority) achieved by insulating themselves against involvement. Another part has been a pietistic heritage which has not taken social struggles seriously. In many instances, however, it has been a lack neither of courage nor of conviction. Rather, lack of understanding and knowledge about the dynamics of social change and the development of new forms of witness and service have kept Christians from responsible participation in the social problems inherent in the contemporary Asian revolution.<sup>54</sup>

Thus there comes to light an urgent need for a search beyond indigenous identity for truth and relevance, for ‘unless something radical happens, something new comes..., the present pattern of doing and teaching things is not adequate to meet the needs of the Church and society.’<sup>55</sup> This realisation paves the way for the emergence of the concept of ‘contextualisation’. It was the Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe (also known as H. C. Hwang) who first announced the term ‘contextualisation’ in place of indigenisation when he was the director of the Theological Education Fund of the WCC, 1965-1979. In his 1972 report, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-1977)*, Coe became the first theologian to put forth the concept of ‘contextualisation’ as differentiated from the other popular missiological terminology ‘indigenisation’. ‘It means all that is implied in the familiar term ‘indigenisation’ and yet seeks to go beyond. Contextualisation has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of third-world context, whereas indigenisation tends to be used in the sense of responding to the gospel in terms of a traditional culture.’<sup>56</sup> ‘Contextualisation, while not ignoring this, takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> Shoki Coe, ‘Text and Context: Keynote Address at Northeast Asia Association of Theological Schools Inauguration,’ *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology*, No. 1 (1968), 127.

<sup>56</sup> Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-1977)* (Bromley: New Life Press, 1972), 20.

which characterise the historical moment of nations in the Third World.’<sup>57</sup>

In spite of the fact that contextualisation has been attached to different meanings and has developed into disparate methods and models,<sup>58</sup> so long as it is ‘authentic’ it can be seen on the whole as an attempt to take the Asian experience and context seriously, so as to integrate the biblical *text* and the human *context*.<sup>59</sup> According to Coe, indigenisation, with its emphasis on the relation of the Gospel to local traditional cultures, tends to be past-orientated and remains a static concept.<sup>60</sup> Contextualisation on the other hand, is ‘dynamic’ and ‘future-orientated’, concerned with the Gospel in relation to social transformation.<sup>61</sup> For ‘[t]he new context is not that of static culture, but the search for the new, which at the same time has involved the culture itself.’<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, one must carefully distinguish between authentic and false forms of contextualisation. The false form ‘yields to uncritical accommodation, a form of culture faith’, whereas authentic contextualisation is always ‘prophetic, arising always out of a genuine encounter between God’s Word and His world’, and advances in the direction of ‘challenging and changing the situation through

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualisation--Meanings, methods and Models*, 148-157; Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 30-110.

<sup>59</sup> Coe, ‘Text and Context’, 126-131; ‘Contextualisation as the Way Toward Reform’ in his own biography published as *Recollections and Reflection*, Intro. and ed. Boris Anderson (Tainan: Taiwan Church News Press, 1993), 267-275; Yashinobu Kumazawa, ‘Where Theology Seeks to Integrate Text and Context’ in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. and with an Introduction by Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 179-208.

<sup>60</sup> As Coe observes that ‘indigenisation is a missiological necessity when the Gospel moves from one cultural soil to another and has to be translated, reinterpreted, and expressed afresh in the new cultural soil.... It is only right that the younger churches, in search of their own identity, should take seriously their own cultural milieu. However, because of the static nature of the metaphor, indigenisation tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of traditional culture. Therefore, it is in danger of being past-oriented. Furthermore, the impression has been given that it is only applicable to Asia and Africa for elsewhere it was felt that the danger lay in over-indigenisation, an uncritical accommodation such as expressed by the culture faiths, the American Way of Life, etc.’ (‘Contextualising Theology’, 20.).

<sup>61</sup> Coe, ‘Contextualising Theology’, 21-22.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 20.



rootedness in and commitment to a given historical moment.’<sup>63</sup>

Coe moves on to say that contextualisation is clearly a ‘dynamic, not a static, process, recognising the continually changing nature of every human situation and the possibility for change, thus opening the way for the future.’<sup>64</sup> Contextualisation, therefore, becomes the missiological discernment and awareness of the contexts in a particular historical moment. It assesses the ‘peculiarity of the context in the light of the mission of the Church, as it is called to participate in the mission of God’.<sup>65</sup> A missiological discernment of this kind involves not only words, but also actions and suffering so as to notice where the renewing mission of God is at work, to respond to it and then to participate in a ‘critical assessment of what makes the [human] context really significant in the light of the *Missio Dei*’.<sup>66</sup> To be renewed, Christians must go into the unknown where suffering and bloodshed may await us, but where we are called to participate in Christ’s revolution. We Christians must be renewed that we may be introducers of that one foundation made by God, Jesus Christ. ‘We must be once again inspired by the Spirit to follow Christ outside the gate and the camp and to be with Him in His revolution, even if it means suffering.’<sup>67</sup>

That is to say, contextualisation is not a faddish idea or a debatable topic; rather, it is a dynamic process of *ecclesia semper reformanda*--the renewal and reflection of the Church of God with the power of the Holy Spirit in obedience to Christ and His reconciling mission in the world. It centres on the interaction of the text as the Word of God and the context as particular human

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<sup>63</sup> Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context*, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Coe, ‘Contextualising Theology’, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Coe, ‘Text and Context’, 128.

circumstances. 'From the text side, we are pressed by Christ's revolution, by Christ's reconciliation, by Christ's new creation. From the context side, we are pressed by the cries of the revolutions that are going on, by the cry for peace and reconciliation and a new humanity.'<sup>68</sup> From the viewpoint of Christian faith, contextualisation henceforth is 'imperative' rather than optional. As Stephen Bevans claims that to do theology contextually is not an option, nor is it something that should only concern people from the Third World or missionaries who work there. 'The contextualisation of theology--the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context--is really a theological imperative. As we understand theology today, contextualisation is part of the very nature of theology itself.'<sup>69</sup>

Classical theology is academically-oriented and regards theology as a sort of objective science of faith grounded on Scripture and tradition as the two authoritative *loci theologici* whose content 'has not and never will be changed, and is above culture and historically conditioned expression'.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, the endeavour of contextualisation is in no wise proposed to establish another *theologia perennis*. Notwithstanding, while its aim on the one hand is a discontinuity of the classical way of doing theology, it is, on the other hand, a continuity of traditional theology in the sense that it demonstrates that, as long as it is authentic, classical theology 'has been very much rooted in a particular context in some implicit or real way'.<sup>71</sup> Contextualisation 'is the *sine qua non*

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>69</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 3.

of all genuine theological thought, and always has been.’<sup>72</sup> Frankly speaking, no real theology is *non*-contextual, not even that of Thomas Aquinas and Barth, in that a theology that is considered *traditional* must have been contextual too in its time. Again, Bevans illustrates this:

Thomas Aquinas used the newly discovered works of Aristotle as a vehicle for a new synthesis of Christian doctrine.... , but he was...controversial in his day.... Martin Luther’s greatness as a theologian is that he articulated the whole new consciousness of the individual as it emerged in the West at the dawn of modernity. His struggle to find a personal relationship with God was very much in tune with the tenor of the times and was a major reason why his call for the reformation of the church was heard by so many people.... Many more examples from the history of theology could be given--for instance, Schleiermacher’s monumental attempt to root theology in experience in response to the romanticism of his age...., and Karl Barth’s highly contextual theology of the Word of God. What becomes clear, in any case, is that even a cursory glance at the history of theology reveals that there has never been a genuine theology that was articulated in an ivory tower with no reference to or dependence on the events, the thought forms, or the culture of its particular place and time.<sup>73</sup>

It is noteworthy that, unlike in most contextual theologians who conventionally classify Barth into the category of eminently traditional and academic theologians, here Barth’s theology is complimented as ‘highly contextual’ by a contextual theologian for the first time. Obviously, contextualisation, i.e., the process of translation of the biblical *text* into today’s human *context*, is *the* key to a *new* knowledge of the God who ‘was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself...has enlisted us in this ministry of reconciliation.... The God...has not left us alone. He is still with us as the risen and living Lord, promising that He will make all things new’.<sup>74</sup> For fear of either being ‘so contextualised that it becomes fossilised’ or ‘chameleon’

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<sup>72</sup> D. J. Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989), 21.

<sup>73</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Coe, ‘Text and Context’, 129.

theology,<sup>75</sup> the ultimate missionary paradigm of the rendition of text into context is the incarnate God Himself, insofar as Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate as a Jew, identifies Himself with a specific context at a historical moment that transcends history. In His life and teaching He is the supreme and only example of contextualisation; the process of which is testified by the apostles and the churches in the New Testament era. To put it another way, if the Church is going to carry forward its mission, the only power adequate will be that renewal from within by the Holy Spirit in our time. In such a challenging world today ‘we must hear afresh and be renewed by that Spirit which moved the Son of Man to go outside the gate to suffer for the people, and to call His disciples to follow Him’.<sup>76</sup>

In the light of these efforts, contextualisation, namely the translation of the Gospel (text) into the contemporary historical situation (context), can happen only when the faithful interpretation of the Bible engages in a contextual conversation with the human *Sitz im Leben*. In this conversation faith and action must be theologically and morally interact; both derive from the Holy Spirit, who originates the exegetical relevance between text and context. In the dialogue and interaction between text and context, the questions which have emerged from the context always resort to the text for answers; and at once the text reciprocally generates new challenges that face the context. Since the text, in the *evangelical* sense, is given and authoritative while the context is changing and relative, the process of reflection must always be *from text to context*.

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<sup>75</sup> Coe, ‘Contextualising Theology’, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Coe, ‘Text and Context’, 127.

Nevertheless, contrariwise, some radical Asian theologians, including Choan-Seng Song, interpret the idea of a contextualisation *liberally* distinctive from the original evangelical viewpoint, and overthrow the traditional concept of divine revelation as attested in Scripture, since the word of God cannot be identified with any specific form granted, whether biblical or theological formulation. They renounce Scripture as comprising propositional truths, and contend that since Scripture is historically as well as culturally conditioned, all biblical messages are relative and situational. Song, for example, contends that ‘Scripture as the communication of divine revelation is highly *symbolic*, because it tries to express what defies the ordinary means of human communication’.<sup>77</sup> All human languages thus have to be ‘stretched beyond their normal logic to capture something that transcends human rationality’.<sup>78</sup> ‘Scriptures can thus be interpreted symbolically.’<sup>79</sup> For ‘literal readings and interpretations of history disclose little of the authentic meaning which transcends history and informs the latter with revelatory significance’.<sup>80</sup> He continues: ‘Therefore a literal interpretation of the Bible kills revelation. Revelation loses its meaning and power under the literalists who insist on regarding the Bible as a verbatim correspondence between what is written down and what transcends history while working within history.’<sup>81</sup>

Those theologians also claim that there is no truth apart from the action of actual historical events and human struggle within contextual reality. In terms

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<sup>77</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1980), 103.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 103-104. See also *Tell Us Our Names*, 28-29; 36.

of the knowledge of God, there can never be epistemological separation between thought and action, truth and practice; therefore, all genuine theology must be participatory theology. The knowledge of God derives solely from partaking in action and reflection on praxis. As a result, they insist that the hermeneutic procedure must be incarnational in nature, that is, *from context to text*; it does not embark with the exegesis of the Bible, but with a prophetic discernment of God's action of humanisation and liberation in general historical proceeding and in specific contexts. This is what Song calls the *unconventional, irrational, and illogical* 'Word-become-flesh theology' which 'ventures into areas that are out of bounds for traditional theology.'<sup>82</sup> To quote him again: 'Context and revelation: the Word becomes flesh. This is incarnation. To explore its depth and breadth in Asia is a major theological concern. God had made the Word become flesh a divine concern. Can a theology that does not make this concern of God its own concern still be called *theo*-logy?' And, '[w]e come, then, to the birth of Jesus, the Word become flesh. At once we are thrust into history; not a celestial history, but a terrestrial history; not a divine history, but a human history; not a history out of context, but history in a particular context.'<sup>83</sup> The God conceived by these theologians is not an Absolute Being remote from humans; rather, He is the crucified God who suffers with and at the same time liberates His people from suffering by granting them hope.<sup>84</sup> The present writer wishes to pursue in more detail the Asian knowledge of God with a special emphasis on Song's as a typical presentation since he originally comes from the same church as the present writer, the

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<sup>82</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 45-46.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>84</sup> See Song, *Third-Eye Theology* chapter 8: 'Suffering unto Hope' in, 158-175.

Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.

Although in his book *Mangoes or Banana?* the Malaysian theologian Hwa Yung has critically and impartially dealt with Song's earlier writings, covering the period from 1974 to 1986, he unfortunately omits Song's later and more important publications.<sup>85</sup> The succeeding discussions, therefore, while not neglecting what were written earlier, for example, *Third-Eye Theology* (1979) and *The Compassionate God* (1984), will focus mainly on Song's later writings, particularly on his 'Christological Trilogy' (1990-1994).<sup>86</sup> The following section will firstly examine Song's theological methodologies, developed under the influences of Asian theology, while the entire next chapter will probe the content of his theology.

## **II. The Epistemological Foundation of the Knowledge of God in Song-- The Three Major Theological Methodologies**

According to Stephen T. Chan's observation, the preoccupation of Song's theology is twofold: Negatively, it is to liberate the Asian Christian from 'the confinement of western theology'. Positively, it is to venture into uncharted terrain 'searching for new resources for the reconstruction of theology in Asia.'<sup>87</sup> These two attempts, nonetheless, do not outgrow, but still revolve around, the two most common issues of Asian theology--suffering and pluralism. It is alongside these trends that the three theological methodologies

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<sup>85</sup> Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 168-178.

<sup>86</sup> The trilogy, with a general title 'The Cross in the Lotus World', consists of *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), and *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> Stephen T. Chan, 'Narrative, Story and Storytelling: A Study of C. S. Song's Theology of Story,' *Asia Journal of Theology*, 12.1 (April, 1998), 18.

of Song develop: they are the third-eye theology, the theology of transposition and the theology of story. It is noticeable that there is an ultimate distinction between Barth's and Song's teachings of the knowledge of God. Barth treats the ontological foundation (the realities of divine revelation) antecedent to the epistemological foundation (the possibilities), for he insists that this is *the* only order prescribed for human beings by God in Scripture, whereas Song develops the epistemological foundation prior to the ontological foundation, in line with the classical epistemological philosophies.

### (I) *Third-Eye Theology*

In *Third-eye Theology* Song intends to provide an ambitious device in the Asian setting which is accessible to *all* human beings who are in search of the Being 'from whom they derive the power and meaning of their experience', for that Being 'is the source and destiny of their being'. He argues, no matter whether consciously or unconsciously, human beings are bound to search for that Being, as they are conditioned 'by the image of God within them.'<sup>88</sup> Song names this universally accessible device, by which humans can be led to the Being, 'spirituality'. However, spirituality of this kind must not be confused with the spirituality understood 'in a narrow sense'--something procured merely from a religious faith or belief. What Song means by spirituality, existing both in the East and the West, is the entirety of being that 'expresses itself in ways of life, modes of thinking, patterns of behavior and conduct, and attitude toward the mystery that surrounds our immediate world and that beckons us on to the height

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<sup>88</sup> Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 17.



beyond heights, to the depth below depths, and to the lights beyond lights.’<sup>89</sup>

According to Song, the discovery of such a universal and pluralist spirituality in the nature of Asian cultures will broaden the sight of the Christian to see what has long since been disclosed in the Gospel, but is overlooked because of their prejudice. It will enable especially western Christians to see afresh how God’s reconciling work is occurring in places and peoples unknown to them. While the journey to the Being through an Asian spirituality is exciting and enriching, it is also difficult and complicated in that there is a twofold obstacle, pictured as ‘double darkness’, to be conquered: ‘the darkness surrounding the heart of Being and the darkness separating Christian spirituality from other Asian spiritualities.’<sup>90</sup> The first darkness, which surrounds the heart of Being, is what Barth would call the unbridgeable ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between human beings and God, which defies a complete comprehension of the mystery of that Being from the human side by virtue of the logic of reason and rationality. This explains why the human inquiries for that Being have never been in solidarity, but often take vastly different forms of expression for people in different cultures, for lack of a common spirituality.<sup>91</sup> This is particularly true in any religion as well as culture, as in the darkness of Being *all* human beings are confronted with their ultimate puzzlement, anxiety, and fear. This can be seen in the fact that ‘from highly developed religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity to the primitive religions of nomads and other who live on the fringe of modern civilization, each faith has developed its own ways and systems to account for whatever insight each is enabled to gain into the mystery

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 17.

of Being.’<sup>92</sup>

The second darkness results from human *hubris* (pride) and the arrogance that claims to have the complete knowledge of God at his or her fingertip, and therefore has rooted out other approaches to the depth of the mystery of Him. As a result, the spirituality that has developed in each religion is regarded as *sui generis*. Communication between one spirituality and another becomes an almost impossible feat. ‘One spirituality, instead of embracing another spirituality, repels it.’<sup>93</sup> According to Song: ‘Only when the darkness that surrounds different spiritualities is lifted can human beings begin to see the love and compassion of God for the world in a fuller and richer light’.<sup>94</sup> To overcome this double darkness, particularly the darkness that makes different spiritualities unable to communicate with one another, is the task of third-eye theology.<sup>95</sup> That is to say, to bridge the infinite qualitative distance between human beings and the Being, to break the barriers that prohibit spiritualities of different religions from being united, Christians cannot resort to the west-cherished theology; they must look at their own theology afresh ‘with a third eye.’<sup>96</sup> For traditional theology, with which Christians are too familiar and in which most of them are nurtured, ‘is a first- or a second-eye theology--a two-dimensional theology that is not capable of a third-dimensional insight.’<sup>97</sup> It is a ‘flat theology’ canvassing a long stretch of terrain--the two thousand years

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

of church history--‘colored strongly by western thought forms and lifestyles.’<sup>98</sup>

In this two-dimensional theology, dominated by reason and rationality, divine-human relationship is conceptualised rather than actualised in human daily life and experience. This brings about the imposition of a severe limitation on the human experience of God, such as in love and suffering. For scientific and philosophical frameworks that western theologians deploy to gain at the essence and nature of the ‘Reality behind all realities’ does not accord with the point of contact in which God makes himself known to the world.<sup>99</sup> Song points out, Asian Christians can never grasp God’s love and pain until they ‘turn their eyes beyond their self-imposed domain of Christianity’. Once again, he emphasises, ‘to realize and understand this, theologians need a “Third Eye,” namely, a power of perception and insight that enables them to grasp the meaning under the surface of things and phenomena.’<sup>100</sup>

What is a third eye, after all? Song finally tells the reader that the term ‘third eye’ is not his own invention, but a Zen Buddhist idea. According to the Japanese Zen master Daisetz Suzuki: ‘Zen...wants us to open a “third eye,” as Buddhists call it, to the hitherto unheard-of region shut away from us through our own ignorance. When the cloud of ignorance disappears, the infinity of heavens is manifested where we see for the first time into the nature of our own being.’<sup>101</sup> Basically, it can be understood as an Eastern intuitive approach, in contrast to the Western conceptual and rationalistic approach, to the Reality that underlies all realities. Its meaning can be further expanded in the concept of *satori*

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 11, quoting Daisetz Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, First Series (London: Luzac & Company, 1927), 1.

(intuition): ‘*Satori* is enlightenment of the mind as the mind is touched by the truth. It is an experience that leads us to the sudden realization of being in the presence of the truth we have been seeking.’<sup>102</sup> It is nothing but human intuition that transcends the ordinary framework of reason and rationality, ‘breaks into the mystery of mysteries, and enables men and women to come to the presence of the Reality they seek.’<sup>103</sup>

By the aid of *satori* a door into the dimension of things hidden from ordinary human beings will be opened, from which they will be able to break the barrier that restrains them from conceiving the true nature of things, and they will also be able to see the reality behind and beyond appearances. ‘Needless to say’, Song contends, ‘this *satori* is akin to the revelation on which Christian faith depends’, for divine revelation does not come into being as a result of logical reason, nor is it controlled by the principles within which human logic operates. It encounters human beings at the moment they least anticipate it.<sup>104</sup> ‘In *satori* when we are grasped by the power of the Spirit, we gain insight into the nature of realities in terms of pain and suffering. This is true of Christianity as well as Buddhism.’<sup>105</sup> Song believes, experience of *satori* is no less than experience of religious conversation which will certainly mark a new beginning in human life and in human relationship to the surrounding world. Nonetheless, Song points out, there is an essential distinction between Buddhist and Christian *satori*. In terms of Buddhism, *satori* tends to be considered purely to be the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 47.

work of the human spirit.<sup>106</sup> As far as Christianity is concerned, '*satori* is the work of the Holy Spirit within us.'<sup>107</sup> 'The Holy Spirit is thus perceived in *satori* as a power that draws us closer to the source of our being and makes Christians aware of the true nature of our life and the world'.<sup>108</sup> That is to say, from the Christian point of view, reviewing and doing theology with a third eye is the beginning of *satori*. It is no other than opening his or her own heart allowing and appreciating other approaches to the Reality, and awaiting the encounter of the truth of God which has not been completely unveiled before. The Reformation faith, for example, is 'the faith through German eyes, particularly the eyes of Martin Luther. No matter how definitive, influential, and far-reaching it has been, there is no reason why Christians, who are not inheritors of the German spirit, cannot look at Christ and Christian faith differently.<sup>109</sup> Instead of German eyes, 'they must train themselves to see Christ through Chinese eyes, Japanese eyes, Asian eyes, African eyes, Latin American eyes.'<sup>110</sup>

Song goes on to expand the meaning of seeing and doing theology with a third eye by comparing theologians with the Christian artists who try to portray Christ. 'Different portraits show the different characteristics of the identical Christ in accordance with the artists' personal images of Christ by the powerful influences of their own contextual, religious, and ethnic background'.<sup>111</sup> The fact is that no single artist has been able to capture the *whole* Christ; no

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

observation or description of Him is free from falsification. Therefore, each portrait is at the same time a representation and a misrepresentation. Correspondingly, no tradition of the Christian church is free of mistake, no doctrine of the Church proposed by the theologians and church leaders can claim to be infallible.<sup>112</sup> This is also true in the case of theology. As Song asserts that if Christian art can be thought of as a kind of visual theology, Christian theology as we normally understand it is basically a written art. If one speaks of Christian art with a third eye, one must also be able to speak of theology with a third eye. ‘Only until Christian theology has acquired this third-dimensional formulation of Christian faith, will it remain an alien outside the western world.’<sup>113</sup> For the want of this third dimensionality Christian theology is incomplete, underdeveloped, and impoverished. Therefore, Song believes, ‘doing theology with Asian spirituality is meant to be a contribution to the anguish and joy, to the frustration and excitement of this new theological era.’<sup>114</sup> He points out, Christians can, for example, learn to see and do theology with a third eye by following in the steps of Mahatma Gandhi in whom Christianity and Asian spirituality merge.<sup>115</sup> In the person of Gandhi the historical intersection of Christian spirituality and Hindu spirituality blossomed into his principle of non-violence, and in him the world witnesses a tremendous spiritual power,

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 28. ‘As Gandhi recollected the time when he was a young student in England, he had this to confess: ...the New Testament produced a different impression [in contrast to the Old Testament], especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the *Gita*. The verse, “But I say to unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloak too,” delighted me beyond measure.... My young mind tries to unify the teaching of *Gita*, the light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion and appealed to me greatly.”’ (Ibid., 28-29, quoting H. A. Jack, ed., *The Gandhi Reader* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956], 23)

which manifests itself in the social and political transformation of his own nation. By way of what he believed and did, the darkness separating Christian spirituality and Hindu spirituality was partially overcome. For Gandhi disclosed an extraordinary spirituality that was profoundly and deeply rooted in the soul of India and revitalised by the redemptive love of God in Jesus Christ. Although Gandhi never became an institutional Christian, in him a theology of third dimensionality was in motion and has been seen worldwide. Moreover, Song affirms, 'by living up to the principle of non-violence to the end of his earthly life, 'Gandhi was constantly reminded of Jesus who surrendered himself to the death on the cross as the supreme example of God's love.'<sup>116</sup>

It is this Indian who made a deep impression on two prominent Christians in the West in our own day--Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They in fact shared the same *inter-religious* soul-force with Gandhi.<sup>117</sup> And the soul-force they shared will continue to inspire and empower the oppressed in their struggle for love, freedom and justice in the world, regardless of race, culture, or religion. 'It is the task of the theologian with a third eye to discern where such a soul-force is, to be informed by it, and to wrestle with it'<sup>118</sup> in the hope that out of such interaction 'a new consciousness and a new religion and moral commitment may come into being to usher in a new era for the people and nations in Asia.'<sup>119</sup> The task of third-eye theology therefore should be an act of God's love, in the light of how the love of the God-human expresses itself the

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 29ff.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 57.

world.<sup>120</sup> In short, third-eye theology is a theology that ‘enables us to encounter the agony and joy of love in the midst of hatred and despair.’<sup>121</sup>

## (II) *Theology of Transposition*

In *The Compassionate God*, Song says that his theological effort is to develop a ‘transpositional theology’ in the aspects of history, Jesus Christ, and community. The word ‘transposition’ comprises three meanings: shift, communication, and incarnation.

Firstly, ‘*transposition is shift in space and time*’, Song begins with the lexical definition of that word. It denotes that which moves from one location to another location, or time that passes from one period of time to another period of time. Song maintains that the lexical definition of transposition contains theological significance which Christians must heed, because the Gospel itself was *transposed* spacio-temporally from the Middle East to the West. ‘In the providence of God, the biblical world with its faith was transposed from Palestine to the Greco-Roman world and eventually to the rest of the Europe and the West. The person who was chiefly instrumental in this transposition at its initial stage was St. Paul.’<sup>122</sup> Song says:

It was St. Paul who took up this missionary commission and carried the gospel, not to the end of the earth as we understand it today, but to the Greek world and the Roman Empire, considered at that time the entire political and religio-cultural world. Through him transposition of the faith in Christ from the land of the Bible to the western world took place, ushering in the long era of western culture deeply influenced by

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>122</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *The Compassionate God: An Exercise in the Theology of Transposition* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 5.



the spirit of the gospel.<sup>123</sup>

Through the great apostle Paul a *first-hand* transposition of the faith in Christ from the land of the Bible to the western world became reality, when Jesus' first disciples were still not prepared for such a transposition of the Gospel, under the illusion that 'the kingdom of God would be actualised without a transposition of the faith from Jerusalem to the rest of the world'.<sup>124</sup> However, in contrast to the West, 'transposition of the Christian faith to the Third World has largely been a second-hand and a third-hand transposition.'<sup>125</sup>

Song illustrates in a parable that the process of transposition of the Gospel to Asia is like a group of tourists for whom 'nonnegotiable discount' flight tickets from Israel to Asia were purchased in a travel agency run by the West. When checking in, they realised that the journey had been downgraded to economy class, which included many unnecessary intermediary stopovers. Above all, the itinerary could not possibly be altered, as every decision had been made beforehand by the travel agency without reference to them. 'On the whole', Song remarks, 'it was a rewarding journey. But it took too long and there were too many interruptions.' Nevertheless, in spite of excitement and amazement during the journey there were moments of disappointment and exhaustion. Asian Christians were exhausted by trying to keep pace with the traditions and teaching of western churches. This process of education seemed to be endless. They had never been able to know when they could graduate from this school of western Christianity. Above all, they came dangerously close to disowning their own cultural heritage as having no useful meaning in

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 7.

the design of God's salvation.<sup>126</sup>

Then, all of a sudden, they realised that there must be a negotiable and more direct ticket from the biblical land to Asia, whose itinerary can be changed anytime at the request of the participants. Song trusts that a first-hand transposition of faith is presupposed by such a negotiable ticket. 'It is the primary intention of his transpositional theology to facilitate an expedition from Israel to Asia with a ticket of this kind. It searches for ways in which God has not abandoned the nations and peoples of Asia to the process of their own destruction'.<sup>127</sup>

Secondly, '*transposition is communication*'. Here Song is concerned with how those Christian traditions, theological expressions, and complicated ideas primarily formed in the West can be efficiently translated into plain languages which are acceptable to the people of Asia and eventually assimilated to their cultures. He is well aware of the fact that misapprehensions are often incurred and human relationships unintentionally broken down 'when cultural settings, in which communication takes place, change. For without proper translation between people with different cultural backgrounds even simple gestures may lead to misunderstanding.<sup>128</sup> It makes the Christian faith formulated in the West very incomprehensible and incommunicable for the Asians without adequate translation. Even though the content of the Gospel is undoubtedly valuable, its foundation will be shaken and credibility considerably reduced if the way in which it is presented to Asia is called into question. Therefore, the way that faith is addressed must be modified; theological

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 8.

languages and ideas have to be expressed differently, and transplantation of the Gospel has to be mindful of circumstances. To Song, this demonstrates the fact that ‘transposition of theology is more than just formal or linguistic. It has to do with the substance of the message which the church has to communicate. It requires theological discussion to shift to different subjects, to face new questions, and to discover alternative approaches.’<sup>129</sup> He assumes, as far as Asian Christians are concerned, ‘this transposition of faith can be unexpectedly vast, for it is a transposition from the world of biblical faith to the world of Asian cultures and religions’.<sup>130</sup>

Thirdly, ‘*transposition is incarnation*’. At this point Song criticises traditional mission and theology, that have constantly underestimated the immense changeability of the Gospel, and that make the Gospel a very awkward thing.<sup>131</sup> It becomes a series of ‘change-proof’ dogmas that demand the recipients’ servile accommodation and obedience. Unlike traditional mission and theology that is afraid of losing sight of God in the temple of other believers, transpositional theology will assist the *changeable* Gospel to incarnate on Asian soil, and assimilate to Asian cultures. Song argues that it is the changeability of the Gospel which could come in any shape and in any colour, and ‘it is this changeability that makes the Gospel what it is--the good news that God loves and saves people.’<sup>132</sup> He has no doubt that it is the faith in the ‘God who changes, transposes, and becomes flesh in the human life that judges and redeems human beings and the world, that directs his theology of

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

transposition'.<sup>133</sup>

In preparation for transposition of the Gospel, transpositional theology needs to exercise its power to remove the major roadblocks, i.e., centrism, 'so that the road may be cleared for theological traffic in Asia.'<sup>134</sup> That is to say, it decentralises the positions of the histories of Israel and Christianity in the Bible in order to be able to see how God's saving activity is at work in the *whole* world, as a result. This aim can be achieved in three steps. First of all, 'to locate the forces in the Old Testament that draw out of its centrism and set it in relation to other nations.'<sup>135</sup> Second, 'to see how Jesus fought to liberate his own people from ethno-religious centrism.'<sup>136</sup> These first two steps will then clear the road for the third: 'our journey into movements of nations and peoples in Asia that may give us some clues to the ways of God in that vast portion of the world outside the Judeo-Christian traditions.'<sup>137</sup> When the roadblock is removed all human beings irrespective of race, religion, and nationality will be united in 'the communion of love'.<sup>138</sup> This communion of love is the vision of God as He continues in fulfillment of the divine purpose for human history. It is also communion in life and communion in hope.<sup>139</sup> Song asserts: 'Until the time when the communion of love is firmly established in the world of strife and conflict, of pain and suffering, God moves on in compassion.'<sup>140</sup> Human beings have no alternative but to move on with God towards the vision of a

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 260.

community of compassion and communion of love.’<sup>141</sup>

The problems with the theology of transposition and centrism will be further considered in more detail in the following section on the ontological foundation of Song’s doctrine of the knowledge of God.

### (III) *Theology of Story*

In pursuing his story theology, Song declares himself to be after the manner of Jesus, because Jesus Himself frequently made use of stories from outside His own Scripture to reveal to His listeners the message of God.<sup>142</sup> Those stories told by Jesus were not merely past stories; they came to life as parables of the kingdom of God and parables of human life. In Jesus’ story-parables divinity and humanity encounter, as ‘Jesus’ own life is the story-parable of suffering and hope in which God embraces humanity through the death on the cross’.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, Christians can fearlessly resort to stories other than Christian in doing theology, because ‘there is something culturally and spiritually deep in folk tales and fairy stories’.<sup>144</sup> What have been portrayed in them are ordinary children, women, and men ‘puzzled by the mystery of the universe, bewildered by riddles of life, victimized by injustices in the world, and hard pressed by evil socio-political forces.’<sup>145</sup> We human being are all inhabiting world in which meaning and purpose are terribly twisted to serve the whims of the powerful, the cunning, and the unscrupulous. In those stories and

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, ix.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., ix.

tales one will find 'popular theology at its most unsophisticated and yet at its most profound, at its simplest and yet at its deepest, at its most unadorned and yet at its most moving.'<sup>146</sup>

To Song, therefore, there are no stories *sui generis*, not even Christian ones that are comprised in the Scriptures. For there must be as many other stories as there are Christians--'stories of God's forgiving love, stories of undeserved grace, stories of souls in agony and spirits in pain, stories of the uncertainty of life and the assurance of faith.'<sup>147</sup> However, Christian stories and other religious stories are not just literature created for appreciation or comparative studies, but they will actually consolidate at some points, penetrate one another, and finally become integrated into a *common* story of suffering humanity that will inspire social transformation. Song argues,

stories of Christians and stories told by persons of other faiths are not just parallel stories designed for each other to read, learn from, and admire. These stories come together, penetrate each other, and become integrated into the same stories. This has been happening in Asia and elsewhere today. If Christians struggle for human rights, other too are involved in the struggle. If Christians yearn and strive for freedom and democracy, other too the same. When a workers' union is organized to protect workers' rights, in it are to be found Christians and others. When persons mobilize themselves for peace, it is a mobilization of Christians, members of other faiths, and even those who call themselves atheists.<sup>148</sup>

Then the boundary between Christians and believers of other faiths will automatically be dismantled through the shared experiences. Consequently, people of different nations, cultures, and religions will not only be acquainted with, but also able to experience, the gracious salvation of God simply by retrieving and digesting those 'indigenous Asian stories, folktales, and poetry for

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 126-127.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 127.

reconstructing Christian theology in the context of Asian culture.’<sup>149</sup> They are stories of despair and hope, tales of doubt and faith, and accounts of the search for the moral power that will enable persons to live in the world. They are hence, in a true sense ‘parables of human lives’.<sup>150</sup> Song observes that over the centuries there have grown around this monument of cruelty stories and legends, describing the endless tragedies that invaded the lives of common people, humiliating them, uprooting them, and destroying them.<sup>151</sup> What is reflected in these stories, legends, and tales is not only the inaccessible past, but the instantaneous present and the coming future. What is projected in them is the universal struggle of people unto humanity, freedom, and authenticity.

Asian indigenous folk tales are brought alongside Christian stories insofar as there is a shared tussle for humanity. Human beings are in solidarity owing to a common experience of gladness and pain. Moreover, these stories are ‘stories of persons created in God’s image--persons in whom God imaged God’s own self.’<sup>152</sup> Accordingly, they are stories of the spirit, of the soul, of humanity, and also of God.<sup>153</sup> If there are stories which can be considered to be *sui generis*, for Song, they can only be stories of suffering humanity, Christian or non-Christian. In such stories people outside the Christian community may come to realise that God’s forgiving love is not only for Christians but also for

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<sup>149</sup> Chan, ‘Narrative, Story and Storytelling’, 17.

<sup>150</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, ix. Song illustrates this kind of theological interpretation of non-biblical stories in *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People’s Political Theology*. By doing so he wishes to demonstrate that ‘theology is a *synthetic* art...projecting a picture, an image, a symbol, about reality on the basis of the Bible *and* out of the life that flows in our veins and in the veins of our people. *The story of God*--this is what theology essentially is--is the story of people, not just of Jewish-Christian people, but of millions and tens of millions of people here in Asia’ (Song, ‘Preface’ to *The Tears of Lady Meng*, vii).’

<sup>151</sup> *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People’s Political Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), 25.

<sup>152</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 127.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

them. 'In them they may see their own soul in agony and their own spirit in pain, their own uncertain lives, and their need for the assurance of faith.'<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, in these Christian narratives non-Christians may encounter the God 'who is also their God, get a glimpse of God's secrets for their own humanity, and realize they are also part of God's vision for the future of creation.'<sup>155</sup>

Even though different stories contain different meanings of their own, 'they have one all-embracing purpose: the attempt to grapple with the question of how Christians should reappropriate faith in Jesus Christ in this culturally, religiously, and socio-politically pluralistic and divisive world'<sup>156</sup>. Endeavour to answer the question will guide Christians to a 'profound reinterpretation of Christian faith and to deeper appreciation of God's creating and redeeming work in human community.'<sup>157</sup> Song believes that Christian theology must be reconstructed on this new interpretation and new appreciation of Christian faith.<sup>158</sup> All human beings, whether Christian or not, have their own stories, whereby they come to know one other, share secrets of their hearts, envision a brighter future, and partake of God's plans for the human race and the whole of creation.<sup>159</sup> Stories of the people are rich in meaning, transcending their simple language, in their moving scenario, in their obvious moral.<sup>160</sup>

In other words, the stories of suffering humanity are the *terminus a quo* of theology; theology cannot be absent from historical reality. Song claims that they on the whole are 'a precious source of doing theology for theologians who

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>156</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, x.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 126.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.



still retain childlike curiosity for things unknown and innocent, longing for fresh disclosure of divine secrets'.<sup>161</sup> The need to relate theology to the daily experience of human life is so significant that Song avers that 'theology carried out in Asia must begin with humanity and all that it means because it is in humanity that God is theologically involved. For him, 'humanity to theology is like water to fish. Just as fishes die when they are taken out of water, so too theology dies when divorced from human history'<sup>162</sup>. Therefore, the theology designed for the massive suffering majority in Asia must then be a *human theo*-logy. God does not expect human beings to do theology for Him. What God requires is the *theo*-logy for *human* beings. 'The word became flesh' is not just a beautiful theological formula. 'It declares where God's *theo*-logical battle is to be joined and also where our *human* theological response is to take place.'<sup>163</sup>

In Song's theology of story, the Bible scarcely appears in the foreground, because it has been pushed into the background in favour of Asian folk tales and fairy stories. He argues that, unlike the biblical narratives about a particular nation and person in the Old and New Testaments, which are only read by and familiar to a certain number of people, those folk tales and fairy stories have 'something deep'--culturally, spiritually, and universally. In Song, therefore, indigenous Asian tales and stories are always given superior theological attention to the biblical narratives in the traditional Christian faith. By doing so, Song believes that he is 'engaging in a "hermeneutics of suspicion on the ready-made

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<sup>161</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, x.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

theologies and missiologies produced by Western theologians””.<sup>164</sup> He is committed to a ‘self-conscious act to reclaim responsibility as Asian Christians and theologians to make a theological sense of the world of Asia’.<sup>165</sup> He also believes this to be an open-minded truth-finding attitude, because truth does not seem to flourish when confined to rigid dogmatic statements or in an infallible authority. It seems to prefer the company of people from all occupations. ‘It is not our business to protect the truth. Rather it is our business to serve the truth *wherever and whenever it is found*.’<sup>166</sup>

In other words, ‘everything that has to do with human life can be and should be the subject of our theological concern. In this sense, theology has no predefined boundary. On the contrary, theology has to reckon with an unfenced terrain.’<sup>167</sup> Therefore, in his story theology, Song is in effect confessing that he no longer regards the Scriptures as the text *sui generis* for his theology, because those Asian indigenous stories are more relevant to the Asian people than are the biblical ones.

### **III. The Ontological Foundation of the Knowledge of God in Song-- Song’s Theological Contents**

#### **(I) *Jesusology***

Despite Song’s claim that the nature of his Trilogy is ‘christological’,<sup>168</sup> he never identifies Jesus with *Christ*. His interest in Jesus does not arise from the Scriptures nor from Christian traditions or doctrines, but from the suffering

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<sup>164</sup> Song, ‘Introduction to the Revised Edition’, *Third-Eye Theology*, 6, cited by Chan, ‘Narrative, Story and Storytelling’, 17.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 15.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>168</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 232.

of the Asian people as well as from the contemporary cultural and social context of Asia. Song is convinced that talking about Jesus within the Asian context and outside biblical and Christian witnesses is ‘closer to Jesus’ own theology of incarnation than most christologies concocted by academic theologians.’<sup>169</sup> For Christians today, especially those of us in Asia and elsewhere in the Third World where religious and cultural pluralism prevails, this can no longer be dismissed as irrelevant on the basis that it has been settled already. They are impelled to examine seriously once again some of the traditional claims the Christian church in the west has made on behalf of Jesus.<sup>170</sup>

For Song, therefore, reinterpretation of Jesus’ identity in the light of the Asian context is indispensable. He argues that the question ‘Who is Jesus?’ for the marginalised people in Asia is not a topic for theological quodlibet. It is rather ‘a question of life and death, the question of whether love is rich enough to fill an empty stomach, strong enough to restore a disfigured humanity, and powerful enough to create life in the midst of death.’<sup>171</sup> Answers propositionally given by Christian traditions and doctrines are never satisfactory to the Asian sufferers. For the ready-made Jesus dictated by church traditions, or crystallised in doctrine is not the real Jesus.<sup>172</sup> The Jesus depicted in traditional theology as ‘the very God and the very man’ is nothing but a metaphysical concept, difficult to grasp in a historical sense.<sup>173</sup> Even the Jesus attested in the Gospels, in Song’s eyes, is merely an ordinary historical figure divinised in the process of oral transmittance among the first-century Jewish

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 147-148.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 12.

people.

The writers of the Gospels were honest enough not to paint a picture of the triumphant Jesus who had overcome the whole world. The fact that candid stories and portrayals such as these were not thought to jeopardize the case for Jesus--the Jesus whom they were witnessing to and proclaiming as the savior and messiah--is important. The memories of Jesus being a very human person close to them did not get completely suppressed in the process of divinizing him. In the mind of his immediate followers Jesus did not cease to be a [human] son, brother, friend, master, or prophet.<sup>174</sup>

Who is the real Jesus then? Song contends that whatever we may make of Jesus--prophet, messiah, Lord, or Son of God--there is one historical fact that cannot be denied, i.e., the fact called Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>175</sup> That is to say, Jesus is through and through a human being who identifies himself with suffering men and women who strive for freedom and justice, and long for life. Jesus will no longer be Jesus over and above these people. The preoccupation of this Jesus' mission on earth is portrayed as the proclamation, realisation of, and participation in the reign of God established 'in people, with people, and for people'.<sup>176</sup> The reign of God, according to Song, is the direct link between God and people, particularly those who are 'oppressed, exploited, downtrodden and marginalised, in body and in spirit, those human beings treated inhumanly, and to whom injustice is done'.<sup>177</sup> By relating to these people, eating and drinking with them, teaching them and empowering them Jesus not only bears witness to but also is the reign of God at the same time.<sup>178</sup> Song asserts that in fulfilling God's reign on earth Jesus does not break into human history from above (a concept which is uprooted from the reality of human daily life) but

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>176</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 23.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 162.

*breaks out of history.*

The reign of God is that dynamic at work inside history through men, women, and children, that power of redemption that mends, heals, and re-creates the entire creation for the day of a new heaven and a new earth. We do not know when that day will be or what the new creation will be like. But we do know that that is the fulfillment of all our days and that the new creation, just as the old creation, is not going to be a *creatio ex nihilo*, but a creation out of the realities that engage our life and history in this world.<sup>179</sup>

The reign of God is established in His personal self-abased life with the poor and the oppressed as well as the experience of humiliation, passivity, subservience, fear, and anxiety.<sup>180</sup> ‘It is not an abstract speculation or theologization of a heavenly kingdom but rather a kingdom of *Minjung* [people] who are struggling for the human dignity inherent in the *imago Dei*.’<sup>181</sup> In the ‘centrality’ of the reign of God, Jesus comes to the periphery to reveal the truth about human life with God, the truth of *Immanuel*.<sup>182</sup> To Song, in the reign of God, Jesus is not an unattainable king standing high above the suffering masses; rather, He Himself is virtually the crucified people.<sup>183</sup> This is the way by which God empowers and awakens the powerless to the positive role they are to play in society, to realise the fact that history is not just made for the powerless but that they make history. ‘They are not only objects of history, but subjects of history’.<sup>184</sup> Song declares: ‘*Jesus, in short, is the crucified people! Jesus means crucified people.* To say Jesus is to say suffering people; to know Jesus

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>181</sup> Hsien-Chih Wang, ‘Some Perspectives on Homeland Theology in the Taiwanese Context’ in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, 194.

<sup>182</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 260.

<sup>183</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 210ff.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 211.

is to know crucified people.’<sup>185</sup> This signifies a critical Christological conversion. In lieu of traditional Christian theology teaching us that to know Jesus we must know God first, Song stresses that to know God we must know Jesus, because Jesus makes God real to us.<sup>186</sup> ‘Now we must go even farther: to know Jesus we must know people. We cannot know Jesus without knowing people at the same time. We cannot talk about Jesus if we do not talk about people simultaneously.’<sup>187</sup>

The idea that Jesus can only be known *a posteriori* to suffering people (anthropology is the measure of Christology) is what Song calls ‘people hermeneutic’ in which people are now the key to who the real Jesus is.<sup>188</sup> The words and work of Jesus must be interpreted in the light of those who suffer both physically and psychologically. It is by involvement in the suffering of earthly people that Jesus is inaugurated as a Messiah, rather than, as recorded in the Gospel, being appointed by God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. ‘Jesus the Messiah is not made in one day.’ He is not called into being out of the blue. ‘Jesus comes into His own as the savior and as the Christ as he becomes more and more deeply absorbed in the impacts that men, women, and children, troubled in body and spirit, make on Him.’<sup>189</sup>

Jesus was not crucified for the sake of sinful humanity, but only with it. ‘Both symbolically and in reality Jesus lived and died *with* suffering people.’<sup>190</sup> Since Jesus is a saviour not by and in Himself, but dependent on the rise and fall

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 216.

of the people, he is incapable of reconciliation and salvation, because human beings can fulfil the work of atonement by themselves. Song underscores this with the Jewish belief that ‘every death has atoning power--even that of a criminal if he dies penitent’, and with the Buddhist conviction that one’s death can be transformed if it is dedicated to ‘the benefit and ultimate happiness of others.’<sup>191</sup> Both ideas are self-justified in nature.

As far as salvation is concerned, Song insists that salvation has been completed since the creation of the world. ‘In any case the story of creation is in a true sense the story of salvation loaded with cosmic and historical implications.’<sup>192</sup> For ‘creation and redemption are in fact two sides of the same coin. Where there is creation, there is redemption. Conversely, where there is redemption, there is creation. Or put it another way, creation is God’s redeeming act, while redemption is God’s creating act.’<sup>193</sup> Song is convinced that the narrative of creation in chapter one of the book of Genesis is not so much a history of the primeval cosmos as a grateful expression of the joy of redemption from the tyranny of chaos. For God does not deal with human beings without specific aim and purpose. He does not relate Himself to them and their world in a general sort of way. Rather, ‘God’s dealing with human beings is radical in the sense that He goes to the root of their need, namely, the need of being right with God and with thier fellow creatures’.<sup>194</sup> As a result, ‘God’s timely act of redemption not only gives rise to new relationships in the

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 232 citing Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin (London: SCM Press, 1966), 231 and Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1992), 219.

<sup>192</sup> Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 39.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>194</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Attempt* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975)19.

ordering of the whole of creation, but also to a *new creation*.’ Viewed from this angle, ‘the experience of redemption is an experience ultimately related to the experience of creation.’<sup>195</sup> As soon as salvation is abstracted from creation, it loses its universal dimension and significance.<sup>196</sup> The notion of creation as redemption or salvation is reinforced by another classic concept in Song that ‘the God of creation is the God of incarnation’.<sup>197</sup> In a typical Universalist statement he asserts: ‘World history is part of the totality embraced by the framework of creation and incarnation. No event and no person is excluded from this creation-incarnation framework. This particularly gives man, yes, every man, a sense of belonging, the *raison d’être* of being in the world, and a consciousness of destiny.’<sup>198</sup>

Therefore, the *opera Dei ad extra* could have done without Jesus Christ. As a result, he feels absolutely confident in saying that God’s salvation did not begin with Jesus. Jesus only proclaimed it, made it clear what it means, worked hard to bring about a new human community that is inspired by it. He only disclosed what had already been existed from the outset of God’s creation.<sup>199</sup> At best, Jesus is merely a flawless moral and political hero, being a perfect example for men and women who are striving for justice and freedom, armed with extraordinary strength and insight. The Spirit, according to Song, is the giver of that strength and insight. Such an interpretation of the Spirit as a giver of moral strength against evil powers is expanded at some length in his Pneumatology in *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, the finale of the Trilogy.

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<sup>195</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>196</sup> Song, *Mission in Reconstruction*, ix-x.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>199</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 147.



## (II) *Pneumatology*

Following from the statement that salvation is consummated universally by the Creator God when the creation of the world is completed, Song argues that the Spirit that ‘descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove’ in time of His baptism, and thereafter abode with Him throughout His life, must be identical with the Spirit that ‘swept over the face of the waters’ before the creation of the world took place.<sup>200</sup> This Creator Spirit consists of vitality as its essence, dynamic as its energy, and freedom as the source of its creativity. By calling it the ‘Creator Spirit’ Song intends to highlight the universality of the Holy Spirit to preserve it from human subdual. For it is not private spirit, a spirit owned, manipulated, or controlled by humans. It is not a spirit that can be cultivated within humans, displayed as their own spirituality, nor demonstrated in their meditation session and in evangelical rallies. The *Spiritus Creator* that empowers and initiates Jesus into the ministry of God’s reign is not even Jesus’ spirit. ‘What we witness here is “the new creation, deposited with all its powers in the soul of Jesus” and “extending itself around Jesus, under the influence of this creative principle.”’<sup>201</sup>

It cannot be monopolised by a particular religious community, not even by the Christian community, because it is the universal Spirit of God at work in creation, in the past or at present. Song argues that it is the same Spirit that motivated the prophets in ancient Israel to remonstrate with the kings and priests who committed crimes. It inspired people in the East and in the West to speak

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<sup>200</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 27.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

out against social evils and the corruption of those in power.<sup>202</sup> ‘What we have in Jesus is a phenomenon--a phenomenon that can be accounted for primarily in relation to God the Creator-Spirit.’<sup>203</sup> The power of that Spirit enables Him to grasp the deeper meaning of realities, particularly the traditions jealously guarded by the religious leaders and the laws and rules strictly enforced by them.<sup>204</sup> It is also because of this Spirit with which Jesus was endowed, and not because of the tradition and institution into which He was born, that He was able to carry out culturally and politically the mission of the reconstruction of human community with absolute freedom and authority. By virtue of that Spirit of God that creates and re-creates in complete freedom, Jesus was able to be totally free from the *sacred* traditions of the Jewish religion and from the oppressive powers of the Roman colonial authorities. By the same token Jesus was also completely free for the crowds who thronged to Him. Authorities and traditions treated these people with contempt but He proclaimed them to belong to God’s reign. It is also because of that spirit of God, that Jesus was completely open to what was true, good, and beautiful in His own community and also beyond it. He practised freedom of that Spirit. He not only practised it; He became the very freedom of that Spirit.<sup>205</sup>

Jesus in the power of the Spirit becomes capable of standing against the tyranny of power that poses a danger to society, and against the power that manipulates truth to suit its own whim and desires. Insofar as that power dehumanises human beings, created in the *imago Dei*, it deprives them of the

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 27-28.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 28.

dignity of human spirit, and reduces them to mere things with no will and integrity of their own. It is power of this kind that confronted Jesus in the religious and political *status quo* that He, in the power of the Spirit, sought to reform. ‘He sought nothing short of a revolution in the concept and exercise of power--power not above truth but under it, power not for its own sake but born of the Spirit of love, justice, and freedom.’<sup>206</sup> Song differentiates the power that directly comes from the Spirit from the so-called ‘spirituality’ that some ‘pious’ Christians are straining after. They separate their spiritual life from social life as though the former was *sacred* and the latter *secular*, and therefore the two were completely incompatible. The power is not bestowed on Jesus for the sake of His spiritual well-being, but for the construction of a new human community with more love and justice. This Spirit differs Jesus fundamentally from the Jesus many Christians mold from the characteristics they attribute to a pious person. Song signs: ‘How far removed this Jesus is from the Jesus, filled with the Spirit, who made the reign of God His cause, challenged the faith and piety of His own religious traditions, and envisioned a new human community with more love and justice!’<sup>207</sup>

The Christians who seek only spiritual well-being do not realise that the real world viewed by others is different from the world observed by those Christians. Their faith brings the assumption that the life that confronts others is not shaped by what those Christians of piety consider desirable in their own lives. The real God ‘who so loved the world’ seems to have nothing to do with

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 30.

the God worshipped in their churches.<sup>208</sup> It is because those Christians fail to see the world with the eyes of others, to perceive the meaning of life from within others' lives, to be part of their search for God in the human community torn with suffering, pain, and conflicts.<sup>209</sup> The true Spirit thus becomes totally hidden from them--hidden because they have already decided the Spirit only blows within Christianity, because they have determined where the Spirit comes from and where it is going.<sup>210</sup>

For Song, it is the teachings and practices of the Church and its doctrines that should be held most responsible for creating such a dichotomy between spirituality and secularity among those Christians. He avers that Christian doctrines have primarily been the result of excluding what the ecclesiastical authorities have determined to be heresies. Theological assertions concerning non-Christian beliefs and practices of cultures and religions are made by repudiating them. 'The process through which the Christian church has defended its truth is not unlike that of the religious authorities that passed a verdict on Jesus as a blasphemer of God and a rebel against long-cherished social and religious traditions.'<sup>211</sup> The very basis that makes truth possible and graspable is eroded.<sup>212</sup>

On the contrary, the power of the Spirit, with which Jesus was armed capacitates Him to say what He said and do what he did, is utterly free from Christian prejudice, doctrinal system, and ecclesiastical hierarchy, 'allowing fresh insights to illuminate our minds, letting new lights to shine in the darkness

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

of our hearts.’<sup>213</sup> It is the identical power that enables Christians to experience anew the ‘amazing ways in which God is engaged in God’s saving activity in their cultural and religious pluralism’.<sup>214</sup> That is to say, Christians, especially those in the West, must learn to appreciate the *spiritualis vestigium* that is found outside their traditions by taking those questions seriously: How does that Spirit manifest itself in Asia, for example, in that vast part of the world?<sup>215</sup> The truth, the justice, and the love that the Spirit stands for--what forms do they take, forms that must be very different from the forms they have taken in the West shaped by centuries of the history of Christianity?<sup>216</sup> How are the religious devotion and cultural expressions of people of other faiths to be understood, not simply as deviations from or corruption of the human nature created by God, but as manifestations, though always imperfect and defective, of human longings for God?<sup>217</sup> When they begin to take these questions seriously and begin to answer them by respecting other cultures than Western Christianity and eventually partaking in of their brothers’ and sisters’ suffering in Asian, they become real born-again Christians. To be born again from the Spirit of God is to put oneself at the service of that Spirit that ‘blows where it wills.’<sup>218</sup>

Song is convinced that God through the Spirit not only has to do with the life and history of Christians, but also the life and history of other peoples. For in the Spirit we encounter the God of the whole creation and not a God of a particular circle, the God of all nations and not only the God of one special

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 35.

nation. This purports that Christians have to reckon with the fact that God reveals Himself in ways at odds with the ways with which Christians are familiar, therefore, they have to respect histories other than their own as being equally theologically important. It also means that Christians must be prepared for new experiences of God's saving activity in the communities different from theirs.<sup>219</sup> For God can only become who He is, Song argues, in affinity with the *whole* world, rather than merely the Christian world, through the creative power of the Spirit. Christian theology that describes God as self-contented, self-sufficient, and in no need of anything other than Himself misrepresents God and portrays a false picture of God. 'God in God's own self, God in splendid isolation, however glorious and exalted, would be a totally unknown God.'<sup>220</sup>

To pursue this ecumenical (or pluralist) *Weltanschauung* Song feels the need to renew the traditional Pneumatology in order to popularise the gifts of the Holy Spirit that the Christian church claims to have monopolised for centuries. Unlike the Christian Pneumatology, which is believed to be Trinitarian, it must be Unitarian, for the Spirit is not a complete person independent of the Creator Father, but merely an extended personality from Him, existing in the hyphenated name of the 'Creator-Spirit'. To Song, Paul's dealing with the Athenians is the best biblical evidence, demonstrating that through the Spirit God is at work outside the range of the Christian church. In Athens, Song contends that Paul's high Christology was modified by faith in the God of creation. His narrow vision of Christ was widened by his vision of God. His *Christo*-logical horizon was stretched by his *theo*-logical horizon, because he must have realised that

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

Christ without God can be perilous. Uprooted from God and from creation, Christ could become the idol of Christian religion and the icon of Christian culture. As a result, Christian mission could become crusades against other idols and icons, as the history of the expansion of Christianity to Asia and Africa has shown.<sup>221</sup> The second evidence is found in art, literature, and iconoclasm. Song believes to be the same Spirit that enables novelists and poets to gain insights of what is happening in the secret of human hearts and in the depths of the mysterious universe. ‘It has to be this same Spirit that inspires seers, prophets, and reformers to challenge the social and religious status quo and chart a new course for the human spiritual journey.’<sup>222</sup>

The very last proof Song locates is in the concept of the spirit in Chinese philosophy, where he discovers a great abundance of similarities between the spirit and ‘the Creator Spirit’. He assimilates the Spirit with what is called *ch’i*, meaning air or breath or spirit, in the Chinese language. According to the Chinese philosophy: “‘*Ch’i* fills the space between heaven and earth. Heaven and earth, all things between and earth, are all constituted by *ch’i*. Because of *ch’i*, all things... move, change, and function. It itself moves and moves all things.... Human beings and animal-plant life also consist of *ch’i*. The human body is filled with *ch’i*, which comes and goes. The *ch’i* within human body and the *ch’i* outside it are the same *ch’i* and interpenetrate one another.’”<sup>223</sup>

Song is so astonished at these similarities and such theories that he calls it

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 293, quoting and translating Onozawa Seiichi, Fukunaga Atsuji, and Yamanoi Yu, *The Philosophy of Ch’i* (Tokyo University Press, 1978), 356.

‘a “holistic” view of the universe and all things in it, including human beings.’<sup>224</sup> He is like Hegel, who believes that there is such a spirit in the universe as the embodiment of the Infinite, by which the whole universe gradually and automatically will be driven towards perfection without further divine intervention. Consequently, Song regards the created world as *theatrum salvationis Dei* (with the view of breaking the spell of ‘*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*’) in which ‘we human beings are people of hope in our pilgrimage of life, and God’s creation is renewed and directed toward its fulfillment in God’ by the Spirit.<sup>225</sup> Fundamentally, the Spirit is the power that human beings perceive to be at work in themselves, that relates them to one another in a community of relationships, that enables them to interact with nature in empathy, and inspires in them longings for God, the Supreme Being. God, nature, and human beings interpenetrate one another through the Spirit for the health of human beings and for the wholeness of creation. Song believes this to be the way the Spirit is grasped by people in Asia from philosophers to religious teachers to ordinary men and women.<sup>226</sup>

Song is so envious of the power and authority that Jesus possessed from the Spirit, as opposed to the religious leaders in league with political authorities of His day, that he wishes (and so he believes) that the same power and authority can also be obtained and *functioned* by any individual of today for an equivalent purpose. On reception of the Spirit’s inspiration and empowerment, the poor and oppressed of today will be able not only to wrestle with political or religious persecutions which are always under the mask of patriotism, but also to

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 293.



encourage others to transform the world of injustice and hatred into a new world of justice and love.<sup>227</sup> The anticipation of the world of justice and love in a world of injustice and hatred is neither more nor less than the disciples' dreams of the resurrection of their Lord who was crucified and died on the cross. However, the Spirit compelled the disciples to dream of life when they were faced with the menace of their master's death. Just as 'these dreams are proofs that *we human beings are still capable of transcendence* when gripped by the power of the Spirit...that enabled Jesus to overcome the tyranny of death and rise to life', so too the anticipation of the oppressed is a sign that human beings are still 'capable of dreaming about the world of justice and love, of peace and freedom.'<sup>228</sup>

The vision of the just and loving kingdom of God on earth is realisable because the disciples' dreams of the resurrection of the Lord, in whom they had faith and on whom they staked their life, have become historical reality. Song trusts, this miracle of God's saving grace to inspire men and women to fight for that 'which is true, good, and just in the midst if untruth, evil, and injustice.' It will summon the spiritual power dormant in various parts of the world, utilising it and strengthening it to struggle against the destructive powers and overcoming the fear of death. Essentially, it will induce echoes from the very depths of human hearts to respond to God's call to strive for peace, freedom, and life.<sup>229</sup>

Here, we have reached the very core of Song's charismatic and somewhat pragmatic Pneumatology. It is charismatic because he, after the manner of Paul in accordance with the Old Testaments tradition, is convinced that the Spirit

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 310 [italics mine].

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 320.

comes on individuals perceptibly and powerfully. It is pragmatic, because the power of the Spirit is to inspire and function mighty political and ethical actions among the weak in opposition to social injustice. In any case, the Spirit is *not at all* the subjective dimension of God's revelation finally leading to the knowledge of Himself. The focus of the discussion of Song's theological content now turns to see how *theological* his doctrine of the knowledge of *God* can be without the help of objective and subjective aspects.

### (III) *Knowledge of God*

If Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are not the objective and subjective aspects of the revelation of God, then Song's doctrine of the knowledge of God must be Unitarian, not Trinitarian, and anthropological, not Christocentric, in nature. For Song is preoccupied with how to resolve the problem of human *suffering* in his doctrine of the knowledge of God. He tries to answer such questions as: Where does suffering come from? What is the meaning of being suffered? What can human beings do about suffering? Where is God when His people are suffering?

He contends that just as the Israelites of the Old Testament and the Jews of the New, who were trampled under the heels of colonialists, ardently longed for God Himself--who was justly resentful of evil and also merciful to His people--or for a politically and militarily powerful messiah anointed on His behalf, to overthrow the colonial empires, so too Asian Christians anticipate the God who sympathises with the Asian context. However, far from being an almighty Wholly Other from His people, Song describes the God the Asian Christians are looking forward as 'the compassionate God' who does not tolerate

injustice of any kind--for example, politico-economic exploitation and colonialism--yet harmonises with other religions. God does so when He takes upon Himself 'the suffering Messiah'<sup>230</sup> who 'changes, transposes, and becomes flesh in the human life that judges and redeems human beings and the world'.<sup>231</sup> 'The God of Jesus walks with him, carrying the promise that real history begins in pain and suffering, for even God had to cope with the power of darkness and chaos in the beginning when heaven and earth were created. It is the promise that God is in the midst of suffering.' For God bears the suffering of the cross in Jesus Christ, and He tells us that there is no other promise than the promise of the cross borne by Jesus Christ two millenia ago.<sup>232</sup>

The compassionate God not merely knew but also considered *each* individual Asian's suffering, anguish, and misery as His own, and even died on the cross for them all in His capacity of 'the suffering Messiah', on account of the 'communion of love',<sup>233</sup> and irrespective of their races and religions. This communion of love is a dynamic process of the vision of God, as God moves on in fulfilment of the divine purpose for human history' in life and hope.<sup>234</sup> He moves towards those whom He loves in the world of strife and conflict, of pain and suffering.<sup>235</sup> 'God moves from the Tower of Babel to Pentecost, from Israel to Babylon. God moves in Europe, in Africa, in the Americas, in Asia. As God moves, God suffers with the people, sheds tears with them, hopes with them, and creates the communion of love here and

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<sup>230</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 112-116.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 260.

there.<sup>236</sup> The concept of God as the suffering Messiah who languished on all humankind's behalf is reinforced, and reaches its climax in Song's Christological Trilogy.

Song elucidates the crucified office of Jesus by distinguishing the significance of His passion from that of the sacrifice of the lamb in the Exodus event of Passover. By comparison, Song argues, the blood of the lamb is no more than a ritual sign; Jesus announced to the disciples at the Last Supper that His blood is to be shed *uper* (or *peri*) *pollwn*.<sup>237</sup> He points out that the Greek preposition '*uper*' is not to be rendered simply as 'for' nor 'in behalf of', but most adequately as 'to be on someone's side' which signifies the fact that both symbolically and in reality Jesus lived and died *with* suffering people.<sup>238</sup> On the strength of the loving Jesus' love and pain, people are capable of loving and relieving one another in pain. 'In the suffering Jesus we witness the suffering people. In Jesus crucified on the cross we behold the crucified people', and *vice versa*.<sup>239</sup> Therefore, the only way of conceiving of God is *from the suffering people through Jesus to God*. It has been pointed out earlier in Song's Jesusology that knowledge of Jesus must precede the knowledge of God, because God is known and becomes real to us through Jesus. Now Song goes even farther to contend that knowledge of 'people' must antecede knowledge of Jesus. By people he means those 'ordinary women, men, and children, in Jesus' day, today, and in the days to come, economically exploited, politically oppressed, culturally and religiously alienated, sexually, racially, or

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>237</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 215. See *Mark* 14: 24 and *Matthew* 26: 28.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 215-216.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 216.

class-wise discriminated against.’<sup>240</sup>

God’s love towards His people, however, did not cease at the moment of Jesus’ crucifixion and death on the cross for, on behalf of, and with the oppressed, because subsequently to His death, Jesus ‘descended into hell’ where there is the abolition of God and the destruction of humanity. He did this to manifest the love of God in the midst of inhumanity, to stand for what is just, good, and true in a world dominated by power, greed, and hate, that is, to create heaven in hell.<sup>241</sup> In descending into hell, Jesus reveals that the love of God to human beings through Jesus has not been eradicated ‘as long as human beings are capable of making hell of life and history.’<sup>242</sup> On balance, it affirms that Jesus is present with us in the power of the Spirit’--with the people who are struggling to be liberated from the dominating power of earthly hell.<sup>243</sup>

George Gispert-Sauch draws our attention to Song’s Universalist knowledge of God which conveys the impression that God fulfils His salvation of Israel by means of the Persian messiah, Cyrus. Song argues that what certainly happens is that, in the case of Cyrus, other centres may have some reverse impact on that one centre with the result that a radical change in faith is called for. In King Cyrus God has disclosed to the Jewish people : ‘Their one-center theology must become a multi-center theology. Their one-way system of faith is faced with the possibility of a multi-way system of faith. Second Isaiah proves to be a daring pioneer of faith whose vision of God at work in history is enriched and enlarged by a pagan king whom he calls God’s loved

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 174-175.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 180.

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It is knowledge of God ‘from below’<sup>245</sup> which unfolds the fact that God is related to the world’s peoples at many centres.<sup>246</sup> There is no one centre that makes others unnecessary.<sup>247</sup> The knowledge of God from below claims that God can be conceived only in the light of the experience of human suffering in search of *justice* within a particular historical and political context. Song argues that it would be sanctimonious for Christians to speak of being faithful to God without at the same time being benevolent socially and politically to their fellow human beings. This is because justice is a socio-political demand as well as a spiritual quality.<sup>248</sup> It is also because He is a God who takes the historico-political affairs of our world with the utmost seriousness. His political involvement in the world is always of an ultimate kind.<sup>249</sup> Therefore, to reject the significance of history in the Christian faith is thus to reject God, and to deny the earthly world is no less than to deny the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, for from first to last, history is the arena of God’s creating-redeeming activities.<sup>250</sup>

Inversely, after the manner of Enlightenment Cartesian (rationalist) and Lockean (empiricist) scepticism, Song intends to debunk Christian traditions, such as church system, doctrines, and liturgy.<sup>251</sup> Song has a disregard for them as human barricades that are presupposed to sunder non-Christians from ‘the

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<sup>244</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 64.

<sup>245</sup> Gispert-Sauch, ‘Asian Theology’, 470. See Song, *The Compassionate God*, 62-64.

<sup>246</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 64.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 207.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>251</sup> With respect to the criticism of the negative influences of Enlightenment philosophies to Christian theology, see Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 4-8; 43-54.

divine mystery of salvation' of God which has already been made available to all humans by the suffering Messiah. 'Ecclesiastical structures become walls surrounding faithful believers. Doctrinal precision creates heretics and infidels. Even expressions of religious devotion in worship and liturgy make peoples alien to one another.' On the contrary, Song believes that the 'suffering of Jesus, the Messiah, has removed all human-made barriers'.<sup>252</sup> Insofar as the 'depths of God's suffering should be the place where all persons, despite their different backgrounds and traditions, can recognise one another as fellow pilgrims in need of God's saving power. In contrast, religious traditions tend to alienate strangers'.<sup>253</sup>

The saving, healing, and reconciling encounter of God with human beings does not occur in the history of Israel and of Christianity in which Christian traditions, doctrines, and liturgy are formed and preserved. 'And above all, it will not take place within the barriers that separate adherents of different faiths, distinguish one race from other races, and alienate strangers and foreigners'.<sup>254</sup> Instead of leading to the right venue 'where God and human beings meet', those human barriers obscure the *conditio sine qua non* for the real knowledge of God which brings humans closer to God and God closer to them.<sup>255</sup> Certainly, for Song, the *conditio sine qua non* for the real knowledge of God must be suffering experience and nothing else. In suffering human beings encounter the suffering love of God, who is the forgiving, redeeming love of God. Song trusts, this is a humbling and yet exciting experience for Christians

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<sup>252</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 115.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 115.

and theologians in Asia to realise that in their culture of suffering the redeeming love of God can be also at work.<sup>256</sup> In short, only in times of suffering--in the depth of the human spirit from which anguish, anxiety, doubt, and uncertainty spring up--can people grasp the presence of God.<sup>257</sup>

Now it is important to see how missiologically feasible Song's theology is in developing such a knowledge of God that makes God universally accessible through all human beings and religious traditions.

#### (IV) *Song's Attitude towards Christian Mission*

In his understanding of and attitude to evangelism, Song is occupied with the question of how to mitigate the impact from *religious pluralism*. Since the positive dimension of Song's theology, according to Chan, is the search for fresh resources to reconstruct theology in Asia, Song must be particularly interested in the reinterpretation of Christian evangelism within the Asian world. Despite the terms 'missiology' or 'Christian mission' which are traditionally used in the Church, Song prefers his 'theology of transposition'.

Song thinks that Christian mission and theology fail to transpose the Gospel to Asia owing to the 'centrism' of traditional mission that has been the roadblock that 'creates a major problem for transpositional theology in Asia'.<sup>258</sup> By 'roadblock of centrism' Song means primarily the concept of *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation history: 'Biblically and theologically, it has been firmly held that Israel and the church form one continuous history representing God's plan of

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<sup>256</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 77.

<sup>257</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 140.

<sup>258</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 16.



salvation.’<sup>259</sup> The concept of *Heilsgeschichte* thus is an *idée fixe* which has unfortunately encouraged the Christian to confine the salvation of God exclusively within the Church and to disconnect world history from God’s salvation from the very beginning when it was brought into existence ‘until it is touched by *Heilsgeschichte* and brought into the sphere of its influence’.<sup>260</sup> In the last analysis, Song argues, the notion of *Heilsgeschichte* derives from Christian superiority that wilfully discriminates against other histories, cultures and religious traditions. Because Christian theology has not yet taken seriously, or had much respect for, the historical specificity of the nations other than Israel and the western nations deeply influenced by Christianity. He points out that Christian theologians tend to jump from *Heilsgeschichte* to world history or universal history, and that if the concept of *Heilsgeschichte* is exclusively and precisely defined to mean Israel and the Christian church, the concept of world history or universal history is, in contrast, vague and imprecise. ‘It is *either* implicitly understood as a projection of the history of Israel and the history of the Christian church *or* it is considered as history in general without specific references. In either case, the nations outside the Judeo-Christian traditions slip through the fingers of Christian theologians, leaving no traces in their doctrines on God, Jesus Christ, the church, or even their history.’<sup>261</sup>

For centuries Asian Christian theology has been suffering from polarisation between revelation and context because of such a discrimination that holds transcendental revelation in the highest regard without reference to diverse earthly contexts. One can easily deduce, for example, from the

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 59.

conventional distinction between general revelation and special revelation in traditional theology, that ‘nothing of redemptive significance happens in the realm of general revelation--which covers the entire Asian world.’<sup>262</sup> Still less does it happen in the case of *Heilsgeschichte* where Asian Christians become ‘theologically disarmed’.<sup>263</sup> In fact the entire concept of *Heilsgeschichte* should be seen as only a pattern of God’s salvation disclosed in ancient Israel; it is exemplified by way of the Christian Church thus to be found in various levels of ‘intensity and concentration’ in those cultures and traditions other than Israel and Christianity.<sup>264</sup> This idea is expanded in greater detail in his interpretation of Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God. It is important to note that here the Greek phrase ‘*basileia tou qeou*’ is translated as the ‘reign of God’ in preference to ‘kingdom of God’ because, Song argues, the latter misrepresents Jesus’ message of God’s reign. The word kingdom ‘conveys the notion of national territory, feudal system, and monarchical structure, in a word, a culture of authoritarianism’.<sup>265</sup> Linked with God’s salvation, as most Christians see it, it gives a ‘false notion of a heavenly realm of inestimable joy and happiness reserved solely for them.’<sup>266</sup> Song is convinced that even though the expression ‘the reign of God’ has its limitation, it at least does not denote the idea of a boundary, which by its nature is political or religious. By contrast, implied in it is the belief that ‘it is God who exercises the rule and not the ecclesiastical authorities, the confession that God exercises the rule in a very

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<sup>262</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 36.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Song, ‘New China and Salvation History--A Methodological Inquiry’, *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, 15.2 (1974), 57, quoted in Yung, *Mongoes or Bananas?*, 169.

<sup>265</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 39.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

special way, uplifting the dispossessed and empowering the oppressed.’<sup>267</sup>  
This is why the *reign* of God has to be used in place of the *kingdom* of God.

Song maintains that this is *the* vision of Jesus’ declaration of the reign of God manifested in the Gospel narratives. In reiterating that the reign of God belongs to the populace, Jesus immediately relates God’s reign to His people, and devastates the invisible barriers set by Jewish traditions that sunder religious authorities and ordinary people.<sup>268</sup> This must be taken seriously and imitated by Asian Christians, for the Church that is unable ‘to envision with Jesus this vision of God’s reign cannot preach Jesus.’<sup>269</sup> Similarly, Christian theology that is not premised on it is bound to develop a theology called *Heilsgeschichte* that leaves no room for those who come from outside the Christian circle. Such a theology is nothing but a bias, says Song, that cripples the Christian’s capacity for visualising God’s act in the midst of the sphere outside the Christian Church, and diminishes God to a size ‘with which they can deal--a size that does not outgrow their limited Christian imagination.... But the God reduced to that size is no longer God. That God is not the God of the reign Jesus proclaimed and practised.’<sup>270</sup> Nevertheless, in contrast with traditional missiological theology that monopolises the saving grace of God for the Christian community, Jesus proclaims: ‘The reign of God is yours!’<sup>271</sup> In saying this, Song argues, Jesus tells them that He stands in the midst of them. In declaring this, Jesus affirms that God is also in the midst of them. And in proclaiming this, Jesus asserts that the reign of God is the reign of God because of the people like

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 23.

Him and His followers who have no place in society and no role to play in a religious community. 'The reign of God, Jesus is saying, is in people, with people, and for people---the reign of God is people! This is the new and startling thing in Jesus' proclamation of God's reign. This is the good news never heard of before. And Jesus takes pains to help people realize how close they are to god's reign, that they and the reign of God exist for each other. This, in essence, is the heart of his ministry and the focus of his mission.'<sup>272</sup>

For Song, this is the authentic and ultimate vision that Jesus proclaimed in the message of the reign of God, whereby Jesus did not merely embody His life and ministry once as a past event in the world history, but is also still carrying it out here and now by inviting the outcasts and the Gentiles to 'the great banquet of God's reign' which was declined and spurned by the landowners, rich, confident, and snobbish.<sup>273</sup> Jesus Christ 'becomes *historic* to people today through the unfolding of God's reign in the life and history of people both inside and outside the Christian church'.<sup>274</sup> The reign of God as historical event enables people today to grasp Jesus as a historical experience. 'Jesus, a Jew, who lived, worked, and died two thousand years ago in the Middle Eastern world of Palestine.'<sup>275</sup> This historical experience of Jesus is not the experience of things that have past and gone. It is an experience of Jesus living, acting, dying, and rising from the dead, not just yesterday,...not just a way back in the first century, but always today.<sup>276</sup> Song is convinced that Jesus' understanding of the reign of God is 'the hermeneutical key to the mystery of God's design for

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

humanity.’<sup>277</sup> That understanding is also ‘the theological clue for Christians to solve the puzzle of how God is at once the God of Jesus, the God of Christians, *and* the God of all human beings regardless of sex, color, or creed.’<sup>278</sup> Thus both the *terminus a quo* of a *bona fide* Christian missiology, so to speak, must be Universalist (or pluralist) in nature, and the *terminus ad quem* must be Universalism (or pluralism) in essence.

However, after the venting of Song’s pent-up feelings for the existing Christian missiological strategies by dumping the entire concept of *Heilsgeschichte*, one can still hardly make any sense of what exactly Song’s attitude towards evangelism is. One must first of all ask one essential question as to how ‘building and planting’ of a *new* and, most significantly, *viable* Christian evangelism can be done in Asia after the ‘destruction and overthrow’ of the old.<sup>279</sup> To put it differently, how is the transposition of the Gospel to be accomplished in Asia? In what way can salvation history be related to world history? How will Jesus’ vision of God’s reign be able to be proclaimed to others and shared by them? In what way can those outcasts and Gentiles be invited to the Christian banquet? Unfortunately, no direct or explicit answers were given by Song himself either in *The Compassionate God* (1982), in which the theology of transposition is intensely proposed and the concept of *Heilsgeschichte* fiercely denounced, or in the Christological trilogy (1990-1994). Nonetheless, indirect and implicit answers can be found between the lines. Song indicates that in any case Christian mission and evangelism are in fact inadequate, as God has already blessed the world since the beginning by creating

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 19.

<sup>279</sup> Cf. *Jeremiah* 1: 9.

it from formlessness, and accordingly, God's reign, rooted in God's creation, cannot be monopolized by a particular nation. 'It is based on God's creating activity that spans the whole of creation and embraces the whole of humanity, the reign of God cannot be restricted within a particular religious tradition.'<sup>280</sup> Christian mission and evangelism are inadequate also because 'God has become flesh in humanity, and is incarnate in Jesus Christ and through Him in all cultures'<sup>281</sup>. Song argues that the very heart of the Gospel is that God risks becoming less than God and risks experiencing the agony of God-forsakenness in Jesus on the cross. However, 'because of the risk God has taken human beings are saved, and the world has a hope and a future. It is this God who changes, transpose, and becomes flesh in the human life that judges and redeems human beings and the world.'<sup>282</sup> Therefore, the God of transposition is the God of incarnation.

Christian mission, estranged from the public and instituted with cramped terms, whose aim is to convert 'pagans' to Christianity and to evangelise the whole world and make all its inhabitants Christian has long since been a 'militant mission'. It is a mission not merely attempting to convert the heathen hearts and minds, but is also putting their cultures at stake and perturbing their lives.<sup>283</sup> Christian mission is actually an inescapable consequence of the Church's narrow perspective on God's work, which locates God's saving activity within the Christian community alone. A mission of this sort counters the current of human history that 'progressively forces open the

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<sup>280</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 147 [italics mine].

<sup>281</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 11.

<sup>282</sup> -12.

<sup>283</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 261.

frontiers of science, technology, politics, trade, communications, and cultures, expanding the horizons of human thought and vision, making us dwellers on earth aware not only of our relatedness to one another regardless of our political, cultural, and religious traditions, but also of our responsibility for the future survival of God's creation.'<sup>284</sup> As a result of such a narrow perspective toward the work of God, Christians do a disservice not merely to the human community but to God and God's ongoing activity within the whole creation.<sup>285</sup>

At odds with this is that 'God's mission in the world through Jesus Christ is not a secret mission, but an open mission.'<sup>286</sup> This is what the Word become flesh means. 'Because of this, and only because of this, we see in God's history our own history, in God's agony our own agony, in God's cross our own cross, and in God's resurrection our own resurrection.'<sup>287</sup> Taking this into account, Song calls into question the Church's traditional mission of evangelisation: 'How can we still hold back and make excuses for...speaking our own language, confessing our faith, reiterating our own missionary commitment with monotonous consistency?'<sup>288</sup> He has no doubt that ecclesiastic evangelism is pointless, inasmuch as that God's saving grace has never been anything other than grace, that it has never conceded its freedom to those who call themselves Christians and abandoned its sovereignty to what is known as the Christian church. Unfortunately, Christians in their mission and theology have not really understood the true nature of God's grace. In their overzealousness to recover what we consider to be 'lost souls', they easily forget that God's saving

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 61.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

grace slips away from their control. Grace does not occur, according to Christian statistics, to those outside the sphere of the Christian church and their timetable of reaching them. 'God's grace is grace precisely because it takes us by surprise, upsets our hopes and desires, confuses our mission theology and strategies.'<sup>289</sup>

To Song, consequently, both in methodology and in content as well as in theory and in function, Christian mission is superfluous and therefore completely unnecessary, in that God has already done it on our behalf and He will continue, and actually is continuing, to do so through humanity and its ordinary daily life.

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<sup>289</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 315.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### BARTH AND SONG ON RELIGION

From the early period in his service as a pastor and Christian theologian onwards, Barth has frequently dealt with the question of the relationship between God's unique revelation in Jesus Christ and other existing religions. No one can doubt that religion, according to the aforementioned sense of the two dimensions of revelation, belongs to the *subjective* dimension of revelation. Revelation, as the loving act of God, meets human beings as an event that is, at least, in common with the feature or aspect of the human religious phenomenon. At this level Barth cannot avoid taking account of other religions that expose the equivalent or similar human characteristics, as does Christianity, professed by its believers as a revelatory religion. This chapter will deal with the essential question of religion raised by Barth and Song, since Barth's concept of religion has been the most controversial topic among Asian theologians. In reality, the problem of religion is also the most thorny issues that Asian Christians, who are surrounded by people of other religions, have to face.

In chapter three we discovered that Barth insists that the knowledge of God derives solely from God's self-declaration in act in correspondence with, and being rooted in, His being Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This becomes one of the pivotal guidelines for Barth to differentiate Christianity from other religions, and to regard Christianity as true religion. On the contrary, in Song we see that he identifies the knowledge of God (and theology) with anthropology, with human search for the infinite by way of intuition, stories, *analogia passionis*...and so on. This identification of theology with anthropology has

also become the yardstick for his concept of true religion. Having examined respectively these two theologians in regard to the knowledge of God, this chapter provides a parallel and critical comparison between Barth and Song on false and true religion, one of the most thorny issues that confront Asian Christians, showing that they converge on the notion of false religion, whereas they diverge from that of true religion. While the comparison of the two constitutes the axis of this chapter, Bonhoeffer's concept of religion, which has also gained considerable attention from Asian Christians and is frequently mentioned alongside Barth, will be discussed. In incorporating him here, this chapter intends to show Bonhoeffer's celebrated indictment of Barth's concept of revelation as 'positivism of revelation' or 'revelatory positivism' in his prison letters, so welcomed and frequently cited by Asian theologians, is actually unjustified.

Barth believes that the *real* theological endeavour, that is, Christian knowledge of God, begins not with a series of questionings about human existence or the universe, but by a realisation that the human is first confronted by a divine answer, in the form of a revelation to which a unique witness is borne by Scripture. Having accented the objective and subjective aspects of revelation Barth in turn moves on to take into account the serious question: Is human religion as such an implication of a different possibility of human freedom granted not by the Spirit but by nature alone?

The solution to this issue was exceedingly crucial in the continuation of the church struggle in Germany in the 1930s, when the German-Christians claimed Hitler as a 'gift from God', and Hitler attempted to establish himself as the idol

to be worshipped within the state religion called National Socialism.<sup>1</sup> ‘For the sake of the preservation of the *true* church’<sup>2</sup> Barth reproaches this religion as the godless human’s ‘enterprise of grasping after God’ by the independent exercise of human reason ‘instead of receiving gifts from Him, speaking instead of listening’<sup>3</sup>: this is anathema to Barth. For him, it is impossible for human beings to take any initiative, strictly speaking, in his or her enquiries about God because, by his or her very existence, the human is a potential recipient of a revelation which is one of the inescapable givennesses of life. God is essentially a *prevenient* God who has first spoken to humanity, and anything that humans say, any enquiry that they may make, must necessarily take the form of a response to a God who has all the while been addressing them.

### **I. The Ambiguity of ‘*Aufhebung*’ in Barth**

It is essentially significant to discuss the use of the German term *Aufhebung* in Barth’s thought in relation to his treatment of divine revelation and human religion, for the shared misunderstanding among Asian Christians that Barth is incurably hostile to other religions than Christianity originates from insufficient knowledge of it. *Aufhebung* is a word for which there is no precise equivalent in English and, as far as the present writer knows, in most of the major Asian languages. Herbert Hartwell thus rightly points out that it has a twofold meaning, negatively ‘to abolish’, ‘to cancel or ‘to annul’ as well as, positively, ‘to elevate’, ‘to lift’ or ‘to exalt’.<sup>4</sup> He says, ‘the title of CD, I, 2 par.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter one p. 56, n. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 47 [italics mine].

<sup>3</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 282.

<sup>4</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 88.

17 which at present reads “The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion”, should have been rendered “The Revelation of God as the Abolition *and* Exaltation of Religion.”<sup>5</sup> This *Aufhebung*-formula expresses in summary his view of the dialectic relationship between religion and revelation. Barth contends that, in light of revelation, all human religion is exposed as nothing more than a futile human attempt at self-justification. This opposition to religion and revelation is intensified by Barth’s Christocentric view of revelation; for Barth, God is self-revealed uniquely and sufficiently in Jesus Christ. Consequently, other putative revelations and, essentially, all natural theology Barth sees as belonging to the category of religion and as being opposed to revelation.

Geoffrey Bromiley points out that Barth’s use of *Aufhebung* is derived from the purview of Hegelian pattern.<sup>6</sup> For Barth the term *Aufhebung* indicates the ‘internal dialectic within his idea of religion, noted in *the Epistle to the Romans*.’<sup>7</sup> Veitch also maintains, in *Romans* with a view to preventing the revelation of God from misinterpretation, Barth ‘contrasts *religion*, which retains its “sign” particular, with *religiosity*, which is slavishly attached to a given categorical value’.<sup>8</sup> Barth claims that religion is always ‘a thing in the midst of other things’;<sup>9</sup> it always consists of a fatal dichotomy--a mutually exclusive alternative between life and death. It always involves a contrast, ‘a positive and a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s use of the term is different from Barth’s. Rather than regarding it as a dialectical process towards a higher form of synthesis, in *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer ‘invokes a tension--a “suspension” or “between”’ (*Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophical and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whiston Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996], 31, the editorial’s note 20.).

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Veitch, ‘Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth’, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 231.

negative pole, a *Yes* and a *No*.’<sup>10</sup> Within the sphere of religion the ‘*Either* never swallows the *Or*’, and human beings notice in religion neither the ‘Yes’ which transcends the conflict between ‘Yes’ and ‘No’, nor the life which transcends death’.<sup>11</sup> According to Barth, ‘more than any other human possibility religion is marked with the dualism of *Here* and *There*, presupposition and fact, truth and reality; the religious people above all others are not what they are intended to be’.<sup>12</sup> ‘A dualism controls the whole world of religion, and, consequently, there sin--*abounds*.’<sup>13</sup>

Being ‘peculiarly dangerous’, religion is ‘after all no more than a human possibility’ in opposition to divine grace that is not another possibility.<sup>14</sup> Rather, grace is the ‘impossibility which is possible only in God, and which is unencumbered and untouched by the final possibility, the ambiguity, of religion’.<sup>15</sup> Veitch points out there is even a tendency in religion towards religiosity in spite of the fact they have been distinguished.<sup>16</sup> This explains why revelation must be a ‘momentary *event* which is constantly being renewed’;<sup>17</sup> it shows why human beings are coerced to the concept that God can never be found in human religions.<sup>18</sup> As the ultimate human possibility, religion commands the human to halt. It ‘brings us to the place where we must wait, in order that God may confront us--on the other side of the frontier of religion.’<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>16</sup> Veitch, ‘Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth’, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 242.

This dialectic in *Romans* is the *prototype* of the *Aufhebung* pattern evolved in volume one of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and at this early period Barth meant to demonstrate the way revelation is actually 'received, interpreted and acted upon in history without at the same time being perverted by sin'.<sup>20</sup> Such a dialectic is within religion *per se*: 'that is between religion with its sign character, and religiosity or religion as something merely human'.<sup>21</sup> It is significant, Veitch suggests, 'to recognise that Barth's concept of religion consists of not merely a negative but also a *positive* dimension, which wipes out the misconception that a positive element has never existed in his thought, owing to the scorching critique of the Schleiermacher-Harnack tradition in his commentary on *Romans*'.<sup>22</sup>

Further, in *Romans* this dialectic means that the religion of the sinner has no autonomous or independent capacity of search for God alongside or over against God's self-revelation. Instead, religion is subjected by the divine revelation to a kind of *Aufhebung*, in the sense that religion is abolished, elevated and then reconstituted on a higher plane.<sup>23</sup> In its corruption, as the human-made imagination of God that supposes itself to be the real knowledge of God apart from grace, religion is abolished. In this distinction as a reality, justified by grace, other than and over against revelation, religion is elevated.<sup>24</sup>

In *Aufhebung*, Barth draws our attention to the knowledge that the divine revelation is always *active*, and human religion is relatively *passive*, irresistible to and overwhelmed by the former, whether being abolished or elevated. God's

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<sup>20</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth', 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 326.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

grace of His self-revealing in Jesus Christ towards humans should never be taken for granted. It has never been the deserved gift of any human being, because the human was, and is, merely a *justified sinner*. Apart from the miraculous bestowal and sustenance of faith in and by the act of God's grace itself, humans, as sinners, have no capacity for searching for faith and for 'dialectic' with revelation in order to reach a higher synthesis (faith).<sup>25</sup> In other words, only when the human is passively encountered by revelation can he or she have faith. Barth asserts that in revelation God makes Himself known to humankind that He is God and their Lord.<sup>26</sup>

To highlight it again, unlike the Hegelian pattern, 'within Barth's theology dialectic is never used to assert or hint that human religion is drawn into a kind of synthesis with God's revelation, as though the result of the remarkable transformation were a kind of monism'.<sup>27</sup> The end result of 'the *Aufhebung der Religion*' is like the cross in John's Gospel, paradoxically both the crucifixion and the "lifting up" of humanity.<sup>28</sup> Far from being understood as monistic synthesis in which religion is swallowed up by revelation, it is rather comprehended to be the establishment of a true and gracious fellowship and relationship among them. The real relationship is what Barth has named *faith*. It must be borne in mind from the very outset that Barth, unlike many of his nineteenth-century predecessors, saw the problem of the relationship between Christianity and the other religions as but one of a number of issues on the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>27</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 98. Cf. Chapter One n. 91.

<sup>28</sup> Hart, 'Karl Barth, the Trinity, and Pluralism', 140.

agenda of the theologian.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, he offers no specific theology of religions, developing instead a theology of religion. This means that Barth's 'perspective on the religions' has to be extrapolated from his concept of religion as found in the *Romans* commentaries and in the *Church Dogmatics*, for this concept flows out of Barth's understanding of the nature of revelation.

Bromily rightly points out, God in His action of revelation encounters human beings as an event that 'has at least the aspect or character of a human phenomenon'.<sup>30</sup> In this dimension we frankly have to think of religion in the plural, for there are other religions that display the same or similar human features. However, Bromily continues to say, 'the question, then, is whether or not to regard revelation as one among the many world religions--a particular specimen of the general category which is finally to be understood and expounded in the light of this category.'<sup>31</sup> In Barth's eyes, the answer is definitely positive insofar as he says:

"Christianity" or the "Christian religion" is one predicate for a subject which may have other predicates.... Apart from and alongside Christianity there is Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism and every kind of animistic, totemistic, ascetic, mystical and prophetic religion.... If we are going to know and acknowledge the revelation of God as revelation, then there is this general human element which we cannot avoid or call by any other name.<sup>32</sup>

Barth's definition of religion as human in search of God is to denounce the possibility that through religion one is able to find God, and if not so this revelation would not have been necessary. 'That revelation has taken place proves religion's inadequacy, and now the whole field of religion must be

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<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 284.

<sup>30</sup> Bromily, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 281.



considered in the light of this fact.’<sup>33</sup> Owing to this reason that Barth repudiates the beginning with the ‘empirical study of religion’.<sup>34</sup> Nor does he try, after the manner of neo-Protestantism (by which Barth means what is more commonly called liberal Protestantism) to see how human religion and Christian faith can be co-ordinated, because it is useless and dangerous.<sup>35</sup>

Barth’s paramount task is to try to discover the status of religion from the point of view of faith. Therefore, there can be no doubt of a systematic co-ordination of God and human beings, of revelation and religion. For neither in its presence, nor in its relation to the former, can the latter be considered, let alone defined, except in the light of the former. , Barth believes, the only thing a human being can do is to recount the history of the relationships between the two. Even that takes place in such a way that whatever human beings have to say about the existence, nature and value of religion (human beings) can only and exclusively be disclosed in the light of revelation (God), that is to say, in the course of God’s sovereign action on humankind. Barth affirms that it is human beings as they are revealed in the light of revelation, and only those human beings, who can be seriously treated theologically.<sup>36</sup>

In a word, Barth’s objection to world religions in general, and to the religionism of neo-Protestantism from the eighteenth to the twentieth century in particular, is precisely this: that it understood the Christian revelation in terms of religion and thus as one of many religions, though perhaps as relatively the best of all religions. Thereby it lost sight of the uniqueness of the Christian

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 296-297.

revelation and of its superiority over human religion, a superiority ‘which does not allow us even to consider religion except in the light of revelation’.<sup>37</sup>

## II. Barth’s and Song’s Critique of False Religion

### (I) Barth’s Critique

Having had ‘*Aufhebung*’ in mind, Barth begins to speak of the negative side of his concept of religion in which the so-called ‘false’ religion is regarded as unbelief. Barth’s critique of religion is not a condemnation or curse but a *concern*. ‘We begin by stating that religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed, we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man.’<sup>38</sup> By ‘godless man’ Barth does not particularly mean to refer to non-Christians but generally to those, Christians included, who deem that God can be conceived by virtue of human exertion.<sup>39</sup> Barth warns Christians on the point of clarifying to non-Christians that the ‘great concern’ is a *reflection* of what humans, without God, are like in themselves rather than a *negative* value-judgment.<sup>40</sup>

Having made this characteristically definite and challenging statement at the outset of this discussion, Barth proceeds to qualify it and to safeguard it from misunderstanding. He does not, of course, deny the manifest universality of religion nor does he deny that faith arises out of the soil of human religion and is to be regarded, in one sense, as a religious act. He also emphasises the need for charity and caution in the evaluation of religion. God does not speak to human beings through the Christian faith simply because in this faith Christians have

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 299-300.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 300 [italics mine].

somehow managed to create a better religion than anyone else. God speaks only because of His grace. Christians will see themselves as religious persons like anyone else, yet as those who have been addressed by God and have had their religion overcome by God.<sup>41</sup> Religion is unbelief also on account that it is a human attempt to find justification and sanctification for oneself on one's own terms. This is not the real way to God, but the self-centred way of erecting barriers against God. Characteristically human pious efforts to reconcile God to ourselves must indeed be an abomination in His sight. Barth claims, in a passage which expresses very plainly the essence of his position on this matter, that such autonomous efforts of this kind can signify merely that 'we have the "desire," first in secret, and then, publicly, to resume that being as subject, which we lost in Jesus Christ, our self-determination outside the divine predetermination, and therefore to abandon our faith.'<sup>42</sup>

According to Barth, religion frequently recognises its own imperfection and tries to produce reaction against itself, which consists of protests on behalf of a purer form of religion. One of these, according to Barth, is mysticism; another, rather surprisingly, is atheism, which, when it is serious, he sees as basically a religious revolt against false religions. Yet these protests remain no more than special aspects of the self-confidence which prompts human beings to embark upon their religious quest. However hard they try, they cannot kill religion in its characteristic forms. The real crisis of religion only arises when quite a new factor enters the situation, namely divine action in the form of faith in

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 302-303

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 314.

revelation.<sup>43</sup>

As Kenneth Surin rightly points out, in Barth's eyes human beings on their own are incapable of attaining to the truth on who God is or what He has done for the creation; they are at best and by themselves idolatrous.<sup>44</sup> Barth firmly argues for the divine autonomy and irresistibility of revelation. That is to say, the objectivity and being of revelation must be accepted by its very nature doubtlessly. However, human beings can only accept the divine revelation by faith alone.<sup>45</sup> In highlighting human faith, Surin further explains, Barth does not overemphasise the 'self-authentication' and 'self-interpretation' of revelation at the expense of the importance of human agent.<sup>46</sup>

[B]ecause revelation cannot be unmediated theophany. There is an undeniable anthropological dimension to revelation, in as much as revelation can be what it is only because its truths are revealed to *man* [sic], and because revelation requires the response of faith on the part of human beings if it is to 'complete itself.'<sup>47</sup>

In the following section we will see that because of Buddhism's obvious distinctiveness from other religions, Song intensely argues that one should never regard Buddhism as unbelief. In fact, Barth respects the devotionism in the Japanese Buddhism, 'Yodo-Shin (Sect of the Pure Land founded by Genku-Honen) and Yodo-Shin-Shu (True Sect of the Pure Land founded by Genku's pupil Shinran)', and admires it as the 'logical religion of grace' in comparison with Christianity.<sup>48</sup> In Japanese devotionism, the subject-matter of human life is 'to be born again there after death, and from there to attain to

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<sup>43</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 301-302 [italics mine].

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Surin, 'Revelation, Salvation, the Uniqueness of Christ and Other Religions', *Religious Studies*, 19 (1983), 328.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 340.

*Nirvana*'.<sup>49</sup> Vietch argues, Barth attempts to open the question of 'how to recognise the evidence for a genuine response to the revelation of God'.<sup>50</sup> Barth by no means allows any possibility on human part, in that 'he identifies revelation with the nature of the Father--*Jesus is the grace of God*--unveiled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'.<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, *Japanese Devotionalism* under the cloak of a *religion of grace* is in fact a human allusion and attempt to create the skill that masters the grace of God, and apprantly it is not a 'genuine response to the revelation and grace of God let alone to the forgiveness of sin'.<sup>52</sup> 'When the Christian religion is true to its own character then it acknowledges without qualification that its existence is due solely to the "name of Jesus Christ and nothing else"'.<sup>53</sup>

## (II) Song's Critique

Song's treatment of religion begins with the concern over Asian Christians who encounter the standing challenge of religious pluralism. He says: 'the problem of religions must be treated and apprehended theologically.' For the misunderstanding and conflict between Christianity and other religions have made Christians the public enemies, against the local cultures. He believes that it is the Christian superiority that causes the misunderstanding and conflict. In order to mitigate the conflict, Christians 'can no longer dismiss religions other than Christianity as negative witness to the revelation of God.' From the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth', 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 14. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 343.

Christian point of view, Song argues, they can no longer deny that

the other religions play exactly the same part in the lives of others that Christianity plays in [Christians]. Wherever people take religion seriously it determines their life, gives them the rules to which they submit themselves, and in particular it stamps their thought and action and moral behaviour during the times of crisis in life--birth, maturity, marriage, illness and death--and above and beyond this it is a refuge, a source of comfort and of hope.<sup>54</sup>

All religions, to Song, are human beings' responses to the ultimate circumstance they have confronted. It is a witness to the self-insufficiency of human beings in search of self-fulfilment. It is an outcome of the shift from human beings' dependency on other visible and finite people to dependency on that which transcends themselves, namely, on what is generally called God.<sup>55</sup> However, religion, which is a witness to human self-insufficiency, becomes a means by which human beings obtain the illusion of self-sufficiency and security. Song argues that, although it is right to regard religion as anthropological (its effort to deal with the fundamental needs and aspirations of human beings), it is wrong to conclude that religion is nothing but anthropological. This is the fatal mistake that Christianity has made since it arrived in Asia. Song says:

There has been a strong tendency for Christians to assert categorically that with the exception of Christianity all other religions are anthropological. In so far as religions are regarded as anthropological, they cannot but be idolatrous. Thus, Christian mission is supposed to be engaged in warfare with idolatry. Such a judgment on religions by Christians is correct only in so far as they are not able to see something basic to the being of man beyond idolatry.<sup>56</sup>

Song is convinced that this mistake is made out of Christians' indifference towards others. Therefore, even though idolatry presents a distorted form of the supreme reality to the being of humankind, 'it deserves all sympathy and

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<sup>54</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 181.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 189.

understanding because it represents [human] yearning for the ultimate reality which may shed light on what [humankind] is, what the meaning of life is and what his ultimate destiny will be.’<sup>57</sup> Therefore, in dealing with false and true religion, for Song, like Barth, Christianity is always placed alongside other religions indiscriminately. In keeping with Barth, he also has a trenchant attitude towards the dark side of human religion. However, the focus of his reproach is more on the misuse of religious power in politics in a society where categorical religious and political authorities centre on the same person. To Song, false religion signifies abuse of religious power in politics, and *vice versa*. The temptation to control the two mightiest powers in the world always leads religion and humanity to total corruption. He believes this to be the main reason why humans must combat false religion. For indeed, religion, which stands in a position closest to the source and origin of transcendence, is privileged to be in touch with the sacred, the infinite, the immortal. ‘It is given glimpses of eternity. It comes dangerously close to the mystery that promises the life and power that sets human beings free from finitude and death.’<sup>58</sup> Anyone who is placed in such a privileged position will certainly be tempted to gain possession of power and will not be able to resist the temptation to be in control of that mystery of life. Nor can religion. By believing in such a religion, one will dispose of the need of anything else other than him/herself. It teaches and demands that its believers be completely independent of God and others. For them, self-deification is thus no longer a dream, but a real possibility. This belief, or, rightly speaking, temptation, leads to the danger of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 295.

idolatry in various forms of self-discipline and practice to overcome human limitations and to be more than human.

Religion of this kind is none other than politics that contains destructive powers. Song says that one can find its root in the strong desire *to be like God*. It has always been an irresistible temptation for human beings since the day of Adam and Eve. The temptation results from the awareness of human finitude. In a sense human beings by being finite, are condemned to try to be like God, attempting to achieve self-transcendence. In fact human history is a witness to the sorrowful fact that particularly when self-transcendence is attempted in the political arena, human tragedies ensue. However, instead of self-transcendence, what takes place is not merely the self-destruction of those who have tried to be more than finite and mortal humans, but also the imposition of human-made religious law and restrictions on its adherents. In other words, it can set up an inquisition to condemn those who disagree with religious authorities in matters of morality and doctrine. At worst, it can start a barbarous war to destroy not only its enemies but also countless innocent human lives. Speaking of the Nazi holocaust as a typical example, Song criticises: 'In the name of religion and on behalf of its God, human community has committed holocausts.' He contends that, as a matter of fact, there is no religion which is innocent of religious persecutions. This is very ironic. A religion that preaches love can become a tool of hate. 'It can resort to destruction of lives in defense of salvation of the soul. And when politics and religion join forces in the destruction of the enemies and opponents, fear and anguish fill the hearts of people and stifle their



humanity.’<sup>59</sup>

Song condemns such a religion to have lost its ‘heart’ (compassion), and thus has become ‘demonic’. It is ‘political dictatorship combined with dictatorship over religious beliefs and practices. It controls the whole human person--body, soul, spirit, mind, all’-- with evil powers.<sup>60</sup> While it may look the same from the outside, as it still retains many of the characteristics of religion including rituals, liturgies, teachings, yet it is no longer a religion of compassion. ‘A religion without compassion, religion that ceases to love and suffer together with its believers within and nonbelievers without, is no longer religion.’<sup>61</sup> This is exactly how Jesus’ own religion, the Jewish religion, treated Him: He was arrested, tried, and crucified unto death by the then political authority in league with His own religious leaders for their own sake to ensure their ruling status was unchallenged. Religious and political powers were brought together by false feelings of insecurity to eliminate Him. In such a way Jesus assumed an enormous religious *and* political responsibility with which He moved towards the cross for the benefit of the world--the world in which religion and politics all too often play a dyadic role. Song observes that the desire for possession of these two most forceful powers in the world is part of inborn human nature. ‘From the dawn of human consciousness, religion and politics have never parted company. It is human to worship unseen powers. It is also human to form relationships, build community, and organize society for survival, meaning, and security. The one is religion and the other is politics.’

Religion and politics take different forms in churches and governments,

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<sup>59</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>61</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 141.

but they converge in the lives of individuals, families, communities, and nations. A human being is a politico-religious being. Religion and politics have much to do with each other. The practice of faith and the organization and governance of society are not only related but contribute to and influence each other.... For this reason, values such as freedom, justice, and equality are both political and spiritual values. It is obvious then that struggle for democracy is not only a political struggle, but a spiritual struggle.<sup>62</sup>

Song believes that this is the reason why religion, like politics, through its leaders such as priests and monks, often plays God to humble people and keeps them at their mercy, and why Jesus found Himself having to oppose the religious authorities in His time. This is also why religions, including Judaism and Christianity, never run short of prophets and reformers. For Song, misuse of religious power in politics, or misuse of political force in religion is far worse than the factors of self-justification and self-sanctification in human religion. 'The God represented in such religious practices is a revengeful God, a bloodthirsty God, a God to be feared rather than to be loved.'<sup>63</sup> Song points out that this is particularly true in Christianity, because 'it is an experience of God such as this that shaped much of Christian teaching concerning salvation and atonement and contributed to the prejudice of Christians toward people of other faiths and culture.'<sup>64</sup>

Similar to Barth, Song loathes institutional religions, particularly Christianity. He says: 'Religion, especially institutionalized religion, has often proved an obstacle to change.'<sup>65</sup> This is because the God of an organised religion, and of a religious hierarchy is bound to become 'a strange God estranged from the lives of people and alienated from their human longings and

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<sup>62</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 192.

<sup>63</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 24.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 95.

experiences.’<sup>66</sup> In institutional religions the *collective* human invention, i.e. ecclesiastical systems, doctrinal teachings and liturgy, becomes an obstruction between God and human beings. ‘Religion, with its elaborate rituals, doctrinal systems, and hierarchical structures, can become a barrier that separates people from God. The *direct route to God* is closed. When observance of rituals becomes an end in itself, God becomes dispensable.’ When subscription to doctrine and dogma is regarded as the test of orthodoxy, freedom of faith in God is denied. When an ecclesiastical hierarchy sets itself between God and the believers, it claims the power to dispense God’s salvation. This strong critique can equally be applied to all religions, including Christianity.<sup>67</sup> Song moves on: ‘There is always a danger in religion, any religion, to idolize--idolizing everything from power, pomp, doctrine, and creed to some minute detail of how a believer is to be initiated into the mystery of faith. It is such idolizations that fragment the Christian church, split Islam into warring sects, and start religious wars.’<sup>68</sup> Religion of this sort tends to claim itself as a religion *sui generis*, which is actually a barrier in human daily life that sunders different religious believers, living in the same community, and makes them outcasts of the outcasting religion. Song has no doubt that this is exactly what Christianity attempts to achieve. Conversely, the reign of God in which Jesus believed and which He proclaimed is a ‘powerful indictment against religion, any religion, that makes outcasts of certain categories of people’.<sup>69</sup>

For Jesus God makes no outcasts. The word “outcast” does not exist in God’s vocabulary. His God is always there ready to accept and embrace

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<sup>66</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 98.

<sup>67</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 22 [italics mine].

<sup>68</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 167-168.

<sup>69</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 25.

the so-called outcasts. Jesus pointedly makes this clear in his parable of the father's love (Luke 15:11-32). That younger son, reduced to a swineherd, "in effect commits apostasy." That *Jewish* father must know what he is doing when he embraces that apostate son of his bosom. He is acting against the tradition of his religion and the propriety of his society. But God is like that father!<sup>70</sup>

As far as Song is concerned, if there is anything that can be regarded as *sui generis*, it is 'human beings embraced by the love of God at the *most personal and profound level*.'<sup>71</sup> The aftermath of this divine-human encounter, taking form in the way people live, hope, and die, is *sui generis* in each individual circumstance. He believes that the Buddhist religion is the 'most personal and profound level' of being *sui generis*, and thus is free from the same accusation imposed on Christianity. Therefore, he blames Barth for wrongly identifying Buddhism with other religions as unbelief. For, in Song's eyes, Buddhism in essence is highly *individualistic* yet devotional, and less collective; it is more *personal* yet also sacrificial, and less hierarchical. The ultimate purpose of the Buddhists' life is self-fulfilment,<sup>72</sup> and their death can be transformed if it is sacrificed for, and dedicated to, the benefit and ultimate happiness of others.<sup>73</sup> He says, for example, Buddhist faith began with Gautama the Buddha who came to realise that life is in the bondage of suffering. And it is the encounter with suffering which shocked him into the pursuit of enlightenment. Likewise, suffering is our daily experience; it is what we go through in life. Yet it is so common that we tend not to see it. Or it is so unpleasant that we would rather forget about it. Nevertheless, 'to be enlightened is not to avoid it [suffering] but

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>71</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 125 [italics mine].

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>73</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 232, quoting Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1992), 219.

to stare it in the face and do something about it. And this is what the Buddha himself set out to do and what Buddhists face, often with remarkable zeal.’<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, Song argues that Buddhism must not be regarded as unbelief in this sense.

We have seen that, in the previous section, Barth’s interest in Japanese Yodoism is that its form seems to be ‘the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity’ in general, to ‘Reformed Christianity’ in particular, and therefore as a whole ‘confronting Christianity with the question of its truth even as the logical religion of grace’.<sup>75</sup> Song welcomes and regards this positive statement as ‘a great concession’ on Barth’s part. In this regard Song is complimentary and points out with compliment that even though Barth’s theology is uncompromisingly a theo-christo-centric theology, and it is mainly for the Christian church that he conducted his massive theological adventure, yet he was perceptive enough to urge his fellow Christians to be tolerant of other religions. For Barth ‘admitted that the concept of grace taught in Yodoism was so similar to that emphasized in Christianity that it was difficult to distinguish one from another.’ To Song, this simply denotes that Barth is persuaded that ‘the substance of the grace revealed in Jesus Christ and to which the confessing Christians respond openly cannot be absent in and alien to Yodoism.’<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, Song obviously overlooks the fact that Barth also points out that *essentially* ‘Yodoism and all Buddhism stand or fall with the inner power and validity of the stormy desire of man for redemption by dissolution; for entry into Nirvana, to which the “pure land” attainable by faith is

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<sup>74</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 135.

<sup>75</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 340.

<sup>76</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 191-192.

alone merely the forecourt....'<sup>77</sup>

However, Song is very upset about such a 'very sweeping statement' made by 'a great theologian like Barth' and seems to be so in favour of Buddhism that he insists that 'the final goal of [the Buddhist] religion in Nirvana...is not dissolution but fulfilment of the self.'<sup>78</sup> Based upon such a definition of religious faith, he suggests that other religions are no less than Christianity, seeing that in real life Christians are just as worried and concerned about human reality and social issues as are Buddhists, Hindus, *et al.*<sup>79</sup> As a matter of fact, faith for Song is merely a way of life which is 'the power, the dynamic, that makes people a living being.'<sup>80</sup> Precisely speaking, faith is some sort of invisible indispensable paraphernalia by which all human beings survive spiritually, regardless of their religious faiths. Interestingly yet unfortunately, here he identifies faith with persuasive *self-confidence* by misunderstanding, misemploying and, not surprisingly, misinterpreting the Chinese noun *hsin-hsin* (confidence) as *hsin-yang* (religious faith, particularly referring to that of the Christian): 'Here the Chinese noun for faith is most ingenious. It consists of two characters: one from the verb "to believe,"..., and the other from the noun "heart"--*sin-sin*. Faith is *sin-sin*: words that one speaks from one's heart.' Song regards them as the 'words of heart' that oblige us to believe. People may choose not to believe words spoken out of diplomatic necessity, and may scorn demagogic words of politicians wielding their power. They may shrug their shoulders with disbelief, despite the words of eloquent salespersons eager to sell something, and will

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<sup>77</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 342.

<sup>78</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 136.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 136f.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

certainly despise the words of those who flatter out of questionable motivation. But *no one* can ignore, despise, shrug their shoulders at, or scorn the words that have come from the heart. Word of the heart--this is what faith is about.<sup>81</sup>

In fact, *hsin-yang* (faith) also consists of two Chinese characters: the verb 'to believe', as Song has mentioned, and the other verb which means 'to face upwards (with complete reliance on the heavenly Almighty for help, admiration, praise, *et al.*)'. Christian faith, therefore, is 'to completely believe in the heavenly Almighty to whom you face upwards for help', rather than 'to believe in yourself in order to be self-confident'. So far as Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God is concerned, the drastic difference between them is that human *hsin-hsin* highlights the *active* initiation of human will, whereas human *hsin-yang* accentuates the Christian's relatively *passive* response and dedication to God's calling. Undoubtedly, politicians can speak words from their heart with confidence as long as they regard their public policies as the best; the same is true of salespersons. They are confident because they themselves have put forward good policies or products. Hence, 'words that one speaks from one's heart' is not *faith*, but merely *confidence*. Notwithstanding, one must ascertain on what basis words should be considered 'spoken out of diplomatic necessity' and in what capacity or by what means one is able to distinguish genuine words from balderdash, since in this case they are both uttered so well in order to appeal to human beings, and not to God. Barth's own answers to these questions would be that in no way on any human strength can one discern truths from jargon. However, for Barth, the discerning task is not impossible, and can be done both on the basis of the objective revelation of God, which is Jesus Christ

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 137.

the Word revealed and attested by the Word written in the Bible, and proclaimed by the Word preached in the Church, and by virtue of the subjective revelation the Holy Spirit, i.e. by *fides quaerens intellectum*.

As for mission, in applauding what Paul pursued in the city of Athens, as ‘positive’ missiology, Song rebukes Barth’s attitude towards other religions as being ‘sarcastic’ and ‘envious’. While Paul did say to the Athenians who, just like people in other religious cultures, built many altars and shrines, that God, the universal giver of life, breath and indeed of everything, does not depend on services at human hands, he did not say this with sarcasm. He did not point this out to them to ridicule or humiliate them--a tactic often used by ‘jealous Christian evangelists’. ‘What Paul derived from this “theology of God” is not a missiology of “religion as unbelief,” religion as “rebellion against God.”’<sup>82</sup> On the contrary, although Barth did not exempt Christianity as a religion from his theological judgment, when he spoke of the revelation of God as abolition of religion and religion as unbelief, ‘his *negative* view of religion did not contribute to understanding of other religions.’<sup>83</sup> This is an opinion distinctly and diametrically different from what he thought of Barth two decades ago when declaring in *Christian Mission in Reconstruction* that ‘Barth’s theo-christo-centric theology presents real possibility for the church and the Christian mission to come to grips with the phenomenon of religions in a new way.’<sup>84</sup>

It is evident that Song neglects the positive aspect of *Aufhebung*, which will be discussed in the next section, and this results in his fallacious arguments

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<sup>82</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 87 and n. 26 [italics mine].

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 192.



against Barth.<sup>85</sup> In fact, Barth himself has already clarified this issue by insisting that his treatment of 'religion as unbelief did not take into account the distinction between Christian and non-Christian religion'.<sup>86</sup> Rather, his motif was that what Christians talked about people of other religions influenced Christians themselves similarly. 'In the framework of that discussion we could not speak in any special way about Christianity. We could not give it any special or assured place in face of that judgement. Therefore the discussion cannot be understood as a preliminary polemic against the non-Christian religions.'<sup>87</sup>

### **III. Barth and Song on True Religion**

#### *(I) Barth's Concept of True Religion*

Just as there can be true religion as well as false, religion can also be elevated as well as abolished. For Barth, this is the positive theme of the final subsection on true religion in accordance with the most profound and positive sense of the German word *Aufhebung*.<sup>88</sup> As Vietch analyses, Barth believes that human religion should be viewed as the way of human quixotic strives after mysteric union with God, as well as 'the way in which the atheist jettisons God and makes human beings the measure of all things'.<sup>89</sup> For Barth not only non-Christian religions but also 'institutionalised Christianity are at risk of

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<sup>85</sup> The same view, and of course the same mistake, is shared by Alan Race (*Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in Christian Theology of Religions*, 2nd ed. [London: SCM Press, 1993], 11) and Yeow Choo Lak ('Religion: Some Reaction to Karl Barth', *South East Journal of Theology* Vol. 11 [Autumn, 1968], 26).

<sup>86</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 326.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 280ff.

<sup>89</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth', 14.

attempting to live without the grace of God.’<sup>90</sup> ‘In its historical form, as a mode of doctrine, life and order, the Christian religion cannot be the one which the truth belongs *per se*... For obviously the *form*...can never be proved to be incontestably original.’<sup>91</sup> If by what we conceive of as ‘true religion’ we mean truth which attaches to religion *per se* and as such, we will undoubtedly reduce true religion to human morality which human beings can achieve on their own initiative. When humankind is bogged down in the quandary of discerning what ‘true religion’ is, there is solely one norm--the ‘true’ religion is only justified by grace. This involves pure faith—‘not the faith that Christians live by inner consciousness, but the faith that accepts Christianity’s weakness and therein displays its true power as the grace of God.’<sup>92</sup> And again, he claims: ‘In the history of Christianity, just because it is the religion of revelation, the sin is, as it were, committed with a high hand [of God]. Yes, sin! For contradiction against grace is unbelief, and unbelief is sin, indeed it is the sin. It is, therefore, a fact that we can speak of the truth of Christian religion only within the doctrine of the *justificatio impii*.’<sup>93</sup>

Further, ‘when a person is confronted by the revelation of God’s grace and forgiving love at the place of Peniel’--that is to say, ‘at the place where Jesus is to be Lord and Saviour to a person who then acknowledges and confesses that he or she is a sinner (in fact, he or she is “blessed and in this very blessing he sees the face of God and in it he knows the truth”)--such a confession is *the* symptom

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 342 [italics mine].

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 331-333.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 337.

of the truth of the Christian religion.’<sup>94</sup> For then, and only for then, its religion is, or rather becomes, a work of faith in, and obedience to, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, and thus true religion. The free grace of God in Jesus Christ is the ground and mystery of the truth of the Christian religion, since that truth is enclosed in the one name of ‘Jesus Christ as the very heart of the divine reality of revelation which alone constitutes the truth of the Christian religion’.<sup>95</sup> Barth’s understanding of religion illustrates his antipathy to the idea that the Christian theologian ought to begin by analysing religion in general and then go on to treat Christianity (the Church) as an example, albeit a pre-eminent one, of the genus ‘religion’. The extracts given here also illustrate Barth’s approach to the question of the relation of Christianity to other religions. It gives an idea of what would have been Barth’s contribution to what is called by Bonhoeffer ‘religionless Christianity’.<sup>96</sup> Since his prison letters were published Bonhoeffer has become Asian Christians’ favourite ‘western’ theologian whose criticisms of Barth are almost accepted uncritically by them. We shall now pay attention to what Bonhoeffer has to say about Barth in this matter.

In his later period Bonhoeffer pondered deeply on the question raised by Barth of the relationship between Christianity and religion. Bonhoeffer directs his criticisms against forms of Christianity based upon the illusion that humans beings are ‘naturally religious’.<sup>97</sup> He suspects that religion is commonly viewed in a very primitive way as the satisfaction of the human need for security and

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 338-339.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 280.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

significance, and as a lazy way for dealing with the gaps in our knowledge.<sup>98</sup> Hence the ‘God of gaps’ type of religion emerges ‘where God is used as a term to fit in a gap in our ignorance which cannot yet be explained by scientific or other investigation’.<sup>99</sup> With Bonhoeffer, God is not a ‘stop-gap’ or a ‘*deus ex machina*’ that we can use to answer our ‘ultimate questions’ or our unsolved problems, for this leaves God a place only on the borders of human existence.<sup>100</sup> He believes that God ‘must be found at the centre of life: in life, not only in death; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in activity, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Christ. Christ is the centre of life, and in no sense did he come to answer our unsolved problems’.<sup>101</sup>

Bonhoeffer argues passionately for a ‘religionless Christianity’. A Christianity without religiosity is a genuine faith rooted solely in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, rather than in the delusive concept of ‘natural human religiosity’ of Schleiermacher and his heir liberal Protestantism. Any resort to philosophy, culture, or/and religious belief in search for the knowledge of God is therefore ruled out. In the light of ‘religionless Christianity’ Bonhoeffer is aware that Barth has gone between ratiocinative ‘*Scylla* and *Charybdis*’ by his own concept of divine revelation. Surin, in the light of Bonhoeffer’s criticism of Barth, also pinpoints the challenge and quandary situation that Barth’s notion of revelation must confront as follows:<sup>102</sup>

[I]s the knowledge given in revelation a real knowledge, accessible to ordinary human apprehension, or is it some ineffable understanding, perhaps available merely to those who are inspired in some extraordinary

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 281

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Surin, ‘Revelation, Salvation, the Uniqueness of Christ and Other Religions’, 328.

way?<sup>103</sup>

Both Bonhoeffer and Surin criticise ‘that Barth allows a hiatus to exist between revelation and the reality of the world’.<sup>104</sup> As a result, in a letter of 5 May 1944 from prison, although admiring Barth as ‘the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion’ Bonhoeffer upbraided Barth’s concept of religion on the ground that in the place of religion there has appeared ‘an *Offenbarungspositivismus*, positivism of revelation’.<sup>105</sup> For Barth puts in its place a ‘positivist doctrine of Revelation which says, in effect, ‘Like it or lump it’: virgin birth, Trinity, or anything else; each is an equally significant and necessary part of the whole, which must simply be swallowed as a whole or not at all.’<sup>106</sup>

Bonhoeffer avers that if the human position in divine revelation was totally *passive*, one would be compelled to face an alternatively bipolar option, that is, accepting revelation to be Christian or abandoning it as a human being of unbelief. As Regin Prenter points out, Bonhoeffer employs the word *positivismus* with a view to uncovering the irrelevance of the confessions of faith in that ‘they are unrelated, they are reduced to mere data (*postia*) and are to be accepted without any further elucidation.’<sup>107</sup> In the eyes of Bonhoeffer, to be a Christian

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 286.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Prenter, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth’s Positivism of Revelation’, 95; cf. John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World: A Study of Bonhoeffer’s Christology* (London: Collins Publisher, 1967), 156-159. Nevertheless, as to the question of whether Bonhoeffer’s contention that Barth has invented a ‘positivism of revelation’ can be justified Prenter concludes: ‘In my opinion, it is unquestionably false to attribute *such* a positivism of revelation to Barth. Barth is certainly no gnostic. As a theologian of the church he wishes to proclaim the world as God’s good creation and man as God’s partner in the covenant.... It is equally false to think that Barth is not vitally interested in establishing the relation between revelation and the secular life of man’ (123). Cf. Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth’s Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 306-338, especially 311-318, in which Fisher

is not identical with being a churchgoer, a titular Christian who takes God's grace for granted, who is a recipient of 'cheap grace'. He thinks Barth, who simply replaces religion with the Church and identifies those who accept Jesus

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argues that there is no scholarly unanimity *in re* to which Bonhoeffer referred, and how his critique relates to Barth's theology inasmuch as principally Bonhoeffer's indictments of Barth for encouraging a kind of 'cheap grace' were not deployed methodically but rather 'fragmentary and sketchy' (312). He, accordingly, holds that the polemic terminology '*Offenbarungspositivismus*' adapted by Bonhoeffer in accusation of Barth's understanding of divine revelation 'is best deleted from the theological dictionary' or, at least, must be redefined 'as to distance from Bonhoeffer's very problematical usage' (314). Fisher proceeds to point out that Barth seemed to have suggested that Schleiermacher was the one who deserved the title 'positivist' theologian in so far as he 'portrayed revelation as a principle of "divine causality" effective in the original fact from which a particular (or positive) religion takes its genesis' (314-315). Fisher quotes Barth's interpretation of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* with interlineation of the original German words in illustration of his view as follows: '[T]he following comments were offered by Barth in 1927 [1926]: There we are given a definite statement of the correlative concepts of the "positive" and "revealed". At its most succinct the positive for Schleiermacher is the individual or individualised, revelation, on the other hand, is the individualising in every religion. It's the 'original fact' [*Urtasache*] which gives specific form to the specific religion. Obviously the latter is the same element which in the *Reden* is called "the central insight". Schleiermacher laid stress on the term "original event" [*Urtatsache*]. Revelation does not teach, it acts [*sie wirkt*]. It produces a "total impression".... The complete truth of a revelation would presuppose a publication of information by God himself, yet how could such a publication be possible objectively or comprehensible subjectively? What makes a revelation is not that it is true, but that it is effective [*dass sie wirksam ist*]; not that it presents God as he is in and for Himself, but rather that it presents God in his relation to us, or that revelation effects [*auswirkt*] that relation. Revelation is the foundation [*Grund*], the "causality" [*Causalität*] of a specific modification of our self-consciousness. Wherever religion is, there is revelation--not to be deduced psychologically but easily deductible historically as the beginning of the life-process of his religion. Upon revelation thus understood depends also the "lofty arbitrariness" of Christianity which Schleiermacher defended against Schelling. For Christianity is in this sense a positive religion, a religion of revelation' (315. Cf. the English edition of Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Short Writing 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith, with an introduction [1962] by T. F. Torrance, [London: SCM Press, 1962], 179-180.). Aiming at Bonhoeffer's criticisms of being a revelational positivist Barth did seem to get to grips with it trying to grasp its meaning, and, posterior to Bonhoeffer's death, expressed twice his disappointment and bewilderment. First, in his letter to P. W. Herrenbrück dated 21 December 1952 Barth refuses to accept the accusation that he has never upheld a like-it-or-lump-it attitude towards certain doctrines as *conditio sine quo non* of Christian theology ('From a Letter to Superintendent Herrenbrück' in *World Come of Age--A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 90.). Second, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge on 22 May 1967 Barth asks: 'What is the "world come of age"? What is meant by "non-religious interpretation"? What is the "positivism of revelation" ascribed to me?...I do not know what Bonhoeffer himself meant and planned with.... all those catchy phrases?' (*Letters 1961-1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and Heinrich Stoevesandt, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981], 252; 'Letter to Eberhard Bethge' in *Fragment Grace and Gay*, 122.) Basically, Barth regards Bonhoeffer's indictment as inadequate insofar as he sympathises with and considers not merely Bonhoeffer's criticisms on positivism of revelation but all of the prison compositions as a whole as a mixture of impromptu and somewhat whimsical fragments. However, Charles Marsh argues that in those epistolary texts written in prison 'Bonhoeffer...is addressing a conflict in Barth's theology which he had begun to detect as early as *Act and Being*, namely, the tension between revelation and temporality. In the prison writings...Bonhoeffer tried to ameliorate this tension in his task of thinking through the meaning of modernity in light of providing a christological interpretation of worldliness per se' (*Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 26-27).

Christ on their lips with Christians, did not take the problem of religion seriously. Bonhoeffer's plea for a 'religionless Christianity' in this context means primarily a plea for re-definition of the Church, of faith and of the religion of faith. He asserts that the Christian community needs *actively* and conscientiously to contemplate the revelation of God in historic, social and political aspects more urgently today than ever before. It expresses its obedience, and commends its faith, not by displays of personal or corporate piety nor by enunciating a Christian *Weltanschauung*, but by its humble service of the world in the light of Christ. Bonhoeffer's experience in prison was that he often found it easier to deal with apparently non-religious people than with the self-consciously pious. The experience has been the same for many other people of our time. It is a reminder of the unreality of the world into which a false preoccupation with religion can lead people; it is a reminder also of how faith releases people for true human community life with all humanity, whether they bear a Christian label or not.

It is essential to note that Barth's concept of religion requires faith as an integral part of revelation. With him this revelation is revelation only if it is recognised, acknowledged and accepted by human beings. Whereas 'Jesus Christ in the unity of His person and work represents the objective aspect of revelation, the work of the Holy Spirit in human beings, whereby human beings are enabled to receive this (objective) revelation in faith, represents the subjective aspect of revelation.'<sup>108</sup> It is only when we realise the decisive significance of the latter aspect for Barth's concept of revelation that we shall be able to understand both his concentration on God's revelation in Jesus Christ as the one and only revelation of basic importance for Christian faith, and also his rejection of a

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<sup>108</sup> Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 69.

general revelation besides that of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Hartwell is convinced that Bonhoeffer does not do justice to Barth's concept of religion and revelation in his criticism of what he terms Barth's *Offenbarungspositivismus*.<sup>109</sup> When making a definite distinction between the objective and the subjective aspect of revelation, what Barth has in mind is not to argue that God is capable of and does reveal Himself also in the created world, human society, politics and history, 'but contends that this objective revelation does not, and cannot, get through to human beings, to fallen human beings, and therefore it is not revelation as understood by human beings'.<sup>110</sup> Hartwell notes that this is one of the main reasons why Barth rejects the proposition of a general revelation in creation for which, he claims on the basis of a detailed exegesis of the relevant Scripture-passage, support cannot be found in the Bible.<sup>111</sup>

It is certainly true that Barth and Bonhoeffer adopt very negative attitudes towards religion, understood as human invention. Yet Barth is here stressing the natural tendency in humanity to establish ideas of God, and to search for the reliability on them. He is not criticising other religions but *religion* in general. Barth sees the phenomenon of religion at work in Christianity as much as anywhere else; cultural values and political ideology intrude into the Gospel, and become merged with it. Both Barth's and Bonhoeffer's intense anxiety about this development is particularly focused upon the German Church struggle of the 1930s, in which they believe that Germanic ideals are being co-opted into Christian faith. Therefore they are warning German Christians not to serve any object other than Jesus Christ our Lord.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 304ff.; II/1, 97ff.



To Barth, 'Christianity is not a religion' to the extent that no matter how *human* Christianity is, all its manifestations in which it may approximate a religion, are only 'the echo or reflection' of a movement that does not proceed from human beings or have to be accomplished by them. By contrast, human beings are confronted by the 'entirely different kind' of movement to which they must respond. 'Alone among all the religions, Christianity is essentially a pointer, pointing backwards and forwards and in either case upwards, towards the movement of this different being; a movement that differs from all religions, all human leaps and superstructures, and is indeed opposed to all religion.'<sup>112</sup> Therefore, Christianity starts where 'religion ends', and whilst religion has eventually been conquered.<sup>113</sup>

In speaking of 'religion as unbelief', nevertheless, Barth has frankly identified the Christian religion with other world religions on the same basis as the attempt and incapacity of sinful human beings, including Christians and non-Christians, to know God. Yet by the graceful self-revelation of God, sinful human beings, together with their religions, have been justified. On this point, as Vietch points out, for Barth, 'it is proper to speak of Christianity as the *true* religion. Only when it is *elevated* by the grace and love of God to a life of obedience to the Word, can it be true and have the right in humility to consider other religions in the world as a whole as one true religion',<sup>114</sup> and, then, make them accept the Christian religion as their only belief. Barth regards this as the 'advantage and pre-eminence of Christianity, and the light and glory in which its religion stands' and by which alone it is endowed with the 'commission and the

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<sup>112</sup> Barth, *Fragments, Grave and Gay*, 28.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>114</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth', 14.

authority to be a missionary religion'.<sup>115</sup> That is to say, 'to confront the world of religions as the one true religion, with absolute self-confidence to invite and challenge it to abandon its ways and to start on the Christianity way.'<sup>116</sup>

Veitch argues that Barth's concern is for the evangelisation of other religions by virtue of Christian self-confidence. However as he has stated, Christian self-confidence 'makes this appeal not from a position of strength or superiority, but from one of weakness: he can only point to the 'name of Jesus Christ [the crucified]' and the 'grace and forgiving love reflected in that name, as the basis for his claim, and invite others to listen to the word of God in the proclamation of the Gospel'.<sup>117</sup> Without God's grace there cannot be Christianity at all. Thereby, for Barth, the evangelisation of non-Christians is not by means of Christianity's 'special relationship to Christ' *itself* or even to political power, but by God's self-revealing grace *alone*.

Having discussed thoroughly Barth's concept of true religion and some of his western coeval theologians' significant responses to it, the focus now turns to Song.

## (II) *Song's Concept of True Religion*

Even though Song does not only speak of false religion, but also of true religion, he in fact says very little about true religion after condemning false religion. One can easily find that in all his writings, the positive appraisal of true religion is distinctly out of proportion with the denunciation of false religion.

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<sup>115</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 357.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Veitch, 'Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth', 14.

To Song although there is false religion that ‘all too often aligns itself with the powers that be and makes people suffer from religious oppression as well as political oppression’, there is still true religion which contains ‘prophetic or “saintly” elements... that become the voice of the voiceless and struggle with them for freedom and justice.’<sup>118</sup> In speaking of true religion, Song is far more interested in the function of religion than its ingredients. He goes on to rest the discerning task of true religion utterly on human efforts, in character with his anthropocentric viewpoint of religious faith as self-confidence. For him, the way to distinguish true religion from false religion is not by dissecting the internal substance of religion, but by considering the social function of it. A religion is true not on account of its *particularity* (doctrines or traditions), but of its *universality* (concerns over human life). It is not on account of unique religious experience, but of universal spirituality (this is in line with what third-eye theology is looking for) that it ‘liberates people from shackles of life and even religion itself.’<sup>119</sup> He is persuaded that this has its liberative foundation and characteristics in Jesus.

This must have in part been what Jesus had in mind when he said: “Come to me, all who are weary and whose load is heavy; I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and you will find rest for your souls.... What an invitation! How different this is from the religion that deprived people of their freedom with endless demands of laws and regulations!”<sup>120</sup>

Such a true religion must be in intimate connection with its local setting, as it is always culturally and historically conditioned. ‘Religion’, says Song, ‘has

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<sup>118</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 199.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

to do with the totality of life', and it 'demands total commitment of the whole person.' In his opinion, this well explains why conversion from one religious faith to another always requires a radical change in the convert's life. 'It is a radical spiritual change, of course, but not only that. The change also has to do with his human and social relationships and the physical aspect of his life.' Any one religion which wishes to be regarded as true religion must take this criterion seriously. 'This is true of primitive religions as well as highly developed religions. This is also true of mystic religions and very intellectual religions such as Confucianism.'<sup>121</sup> Therefore, religious experience is not a particular kind of experience independent of or outside human experience, but part of and inside it. It cannot exist in abstraction from experience of life. 'That "divinely caused experience" has to get related to our "human" experience to be perceived as such. It is we as humans, not as God or angels, who perceive and realize that particular kind of experience as divine experience. And it is by means of culturally formed and conditioned language that we seek to express it.'<sup>122</sup>

In religion 'we are dealing with what is most mysterious and fascinating in the life of individuals and society. We have to deal with the finite human spirit in the grasp of the infinite divine spirit' in the way that ordinary people 'live, hope, and die'.<sup>123</sup> In other words, the authenticity of true religion comes from the external function of that religion: it is a religion that is free from traditional burdens and joins in solidarity with people of different races, nationalities,

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<sup>121</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 182.

<sup>122</sup> Choan-Seng Song, 'Theological Ways of Jesus', unpublished paper, 25, cited in Chan, "Narrative, Story and Storytelling", 23.

<sup>123</sup> Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 125.

cultural backgrounds, and even beliefs. It is true and communicable not because of any essence or substance, but because it is a *religion of humanity*, i.e., of all living men, women and children. In the light of this true religion of humanity believers will be enlightened to discern the ‘dark side’ of false religion that postulates utter submission of its believers. They will come to realise that submission to any religion without question submission to the *status quo*, perpetuating the tradition with no credibility, and being part of the force that seeks to root out the effort of reform. On the other hand, they will also be empowered to resist false religion--the combination of religious and political powers and the overwhelming temptation to control them at the expense of others--and in such a way to be close and devoted to God. Song argues paradoxically that by virtue of the religion of humanity ‘the most politics-religion tries to drive people away from God, the more people experience the closeness of God. The more religion-politics sets about distancing God from people, the closer God is drawn to people.’ He is convinced: ‘There is no power on earth, not even political power and religious power combined...can separate God from people and drive people away from God.’ This is simply because ‘God is not God without people, and people are not people without God. God is God-with-people and people are people-with-God.’ And ‘God is in the “definition” of people and people are in the “definition” of God. Human beings cannot be “defined” and described apart from God on the one hand, and on the other God cannot be “defined” and described with no relation to human beings.’<sup>124</sup>

By the standard, that a true religion must be a religion of humanity,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 185.

Christianity is laid on the brink of false religion. Because, unlike Buddhism which in most of the Asian countries assimilated and at the same time was assimilated into the local culture, 'Christianity in Asia has to a large extent remained outside this process of assimilation. It has maintained its distinctive and monolithic character. Its impact and influence on indigenous culture have been negligible. It has not contributed in any significant degree to the shaping of the society and the politics that affect the everyday life of the people.'<sup>125</sup> With Song, there is no true religion which is *sui generis* but the Christian *exclusivistic* view of true religion will in effect make true religion a religion *sui generis*. A religion *sui generis* is not so much a religion as religious dogmaticism that 'fosters a militant attitude towards other religions.'<sup>126</sup> When truth is made relevant to real life of the human society in which it functions, it may be *sui generis*, the only one of its kind, with no counterpart anywhere else, in a word, unique. 'Religion, any religion, tends to fall into this trap of uniqueness and dismisses realities beyond itself as either of no importance or of no redeeming value. Christianity, of all religions, is the worst offender in this.'<sup>127</sup> To him, whether in terms of logic or reality, notions such as uniqueness or peculiarity or singleness are baseless and implausible in the modern world that is often called 'global village'. Song explains that this is why he always prefers to speak of 'realities' in the plural. 'Even in the world of religions we have come to realize that beside Christian reality there are Buddhist reality, Hindu reality, Muslim reality, and Confucian reality. And of course within each reality there is again a plurality of realities.' Therefore any truth has to be related to realities,

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<sup>125</sup> Song, *Third-Eye theology*, 21.

<sup>126</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 177.

<sup>127</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 56.

‘realities within the reality of a religion and within the realities of different religions.’<sup>128</sup> He strongly encourages Christians to venture fearlessly on the discovery of the characteristics of the truth that is obtained and addressed through other religions. While the process of Christian search for truth will surely be complicated by this new adventure, but at the same time the faith horizon will also be widened and become more inclusive. ‘It also makes us humble and awe-inspired--humble because the truth we have apprehended within our own realities is only a partial truth, and awe-inspired because there is still so much for us to explore and discover in other realities to come to a fuller appreciation of the truth.’<sup>129</sup>

He deplores that even nowadays most Christians have not paid attention to religions other than Christianity, to that prophetic faith that challenges the religious culture unrelated to Christianity. For Christians ‘have rarely been aware of the fact that woven into the fabric of religious culture is the suffering of people and their longing for deliverance from oppressive social and political powers and institutions’.<sup>130</sup> It does not seem to occur to those Christians that underneath the tone and texture of religious culture are human souls seeking freedom, justice and love. In their eagerness to convert others to their faith, Christians pay little attention to the critical role other religions sometimes play in the life and history of a nation. ‘Such a role they take for granted for Christianity, but they are not ready to concede that almost all religions play that kind of critical role at one time or another, from primal religions to world religions such

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 56-57.

<sup>130</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 199.

as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam.’<sup>131</sup>

Song believes that Western missionaries are to blame for making Christianity Christian dogmatism in Asia. ‘Christianity brought to Asia by Western missionaries... was a militant religion. It was the religion *sui generis*. It tried to establish its place in Asian culture by rejecting the validity of other Asian religions.’<sup>132</sup> The Christianity planted into the Asian soil by the Western missionaries was a manipulated and distorted one. Since then Christianity in Asia has to a certain extent become a ‘religion of utter submission’, which demands unquestioned obedience from believers for the sake of salvation. This has created a serious problem in Asian societies, because ‘uncritical submission to a religious belief and teaching can develop into submission in social and political matters. When this happens, there will be confusion of political authority with religious authority. Uncritical submission to the powers that be is then taken as part of submission to God.’<sup>133</sup> It paves the way for the alliance between religion and politics. Song analyses and warns:

Religion and politics thus enter into a pact--a pact that compromises both religious faith and political wisdom. This is precisely the danger. When a political degree gains religious sanction, it becomes even more official. And the more official it becomes, the more brutal and terrifying the consequences are going to be. History, from ancient times to the present day, is not short of complicities between politics and religion that change the course of history and plunge the world into confusion, madness, and destruction.<sup>134</sup>

Accordingly, Song contends that in the last analysis a true religion must answer in the affirmative to one essential question: ‘Does it or does it not show to the world and to the people the true face of God who forgives, comforts, and

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>132</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 177.

<sup>133</sup> Song, *Jesus the Crucified People*, 43.

<sup>134</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 195.



makes live, the fact of God who is love, justice, and freedom?’<sup>135</sup> He trusts that this is *the* ultimate criterion, and only those who meet this criterion can be qualified as true religion. Apart from this question, all other things, such as ceremonies, rituals, doctrines, teachings, structures, and organisations, are secondary, for they are not the supreme purpose and goal of religion. They are important because to some extent they reflect God’s grace, but can never in any way replace God. Whenever attempt is made to take the place of God, religion is in crisis, ‘a crisis of religion contradicting itself, negating itself, and making itself harmful both to God and to the people who seek God.’<sup>136</sup>

According to what he has already said about true religion, Song seems to suggest that only when Christianity has discarded its superior uniqueness and exclusiveness in the first place can Christianity be qualified as the true religion--his imaginary universal, and somewhat syncretistic, religion of humanity. Nonetheless, in pursuing a religion of this kind Song has slipped onto the slope of what he least expected--religious syncretism: ‘The practice of syncretistic religion becomes questionable when what is considered to be true and good in a particular religion is taken out of its contexts and made to blend with other religious elements abstracted from their respective *Sitz im Leben*. This cannot be done without causing serious damage to the integrity of the religion in question.’<sup>137</sup>

#### IV. Concluding Evaluation

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 178.

In the above discussion of the two theologians' criticism of religion while not on the same level, both Song and Barth intend to approach other religions in comparison with Christianity by means of certain kinds of self-confidence. Yet Barth insists that if human religion, including Christian religion, ignores or neglects God's revelation and grace in Jesus Christ, it cannot be 'true religion'. His notion of true religion strongly stresses the *activity* and mightiness of the divine revelation and grace in God confronting human beings, and the *passivity* and incapacity of human beings. In such a dialectic relationship, the triune God bestows His faith (Christian self-confidence) to them. For Barth, the revelation and grace of God in Jesus Christ has undoubtedly always been dialectic insofar as the Father made His Son die on the cross and rise again, in order to overcome the power of death; thereby Christians are strengthened by the Son's weakness and humble obedience through the Spirit. In this regard Barth highlights the whole otherness and absolute authority of God, that human beings have not been able to expect *a priori*.

This has demonstrated that making Barth's concept of religion the *terminus a quo* for constructing his notion of religions is mistaken, not only because it takes Barth at his most polemical, but also because it assumes the very relationship between religion and religions which he was attacking. This point is a crucial one in the discussion of Barth's view of religion. Barth himself confirms this opinion when mentioning that his discussion of religion cannot be regarded as an initiative of denouncement of non-Christians, 'with a view to the ultimate assertion that the Christian religion is the true religion.'<sup>138</sup> Thus, even if the interpretation of Barth as unequivocally hostile to *religion*,

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<sup>138</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 326.

Christianity itself included, is correct, the step of applying that ‘negative view’ to other *religions* is still completely unjustified.<sup>139</sup>

‘Religion’ in the *Church Dogmatics* is no more than an extrinsic framework or a *formal category*--the logical conclusion of his consecutive loyalty to the Word of God is by way of a severe critique of the liberal, as well as the German Christian position, and thus for Barth is devoid of any intrinsic intimation. It serves simply as the backdrop, displaying the incapacity of human nature, against which an extremely positive understanding of revelation as the sole contextual knowledge of God--Barth’s primary concern--is projected.

As for Song, the encounter with other religions in Asia is theologically necessary. For ‘the work of Christian theologians cannot be said to be sound until its result are tested by other religions.’ Even though, in this process of trial, there is a great risk of ‘having to acknowledge the misrepresentation of God’s truth prior to a reference to other religious contexts’, Christians still have to undertake in order to view the truth of God from a much wider perspective. Therefore, he avers, it is imperative for Christians to engage themselves in theological reflections on the meaning of religion in the divine-human relationships.<sup>140</sup> However, his so-called religion of humanity, in hope of offering an answer to the issue of religious pluralism that confronts Asian Christians, is simply a new version the old religious syncretism. It is evidently a result of his pursuit for inter-religious dialogue going to extremes. Unfortunately, for example, instead of helping Taiwanese Christians in resolving the aforementioned problem, their faith and identity are put under threat, and

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<sup>139</sup> Cf. Hart, ‘Karl Barth, the Trinity, and Pluralism’, 141.

<sup>140</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 181.

become more vulnerable than ever before. Both Barth's and Song's treatment of religion will be further examined alongside other aspects in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX CRITICISMS OF BARTH AND SONG

### I. Criticisms of Barth

As has been pointed out Barth's rejection of natural theology ought not to be abstracted from its historical context. If it were not for the historical context within which Barth had been struggling, his repudiation of natural theology would certainly look like a ruthless attempt to confine knowledge of God to the biblical revelation. This would close the door to a worthwhile dialogue with those who are willing to listen and to talk about, with a potential to believe in, the 'Christian' God outside the pale of the Church. Such a dialogue is both a privilege and an *obligation* for Asian Christians, as the mass majority of the Asian population consists of atheists, humanists and believers in other religions.<sup>1</sup> In order to do justice to those who react against Barth in this regard, apart from the historical point of view, Barth's repudiation of natural theology must also be examined theologically and biblically. His whole offensive against natural theology is launched for fear of the possibility that another source of knowledge of God, which is out of keeping with the redemptive characteristic of divine revelation, will take the place of the revelation in Christ as it progresses. To search for a revelation exclusive of reconciliation, to Barth, is to search for a revelation without grace, since he associates revelation closely with reconciliation. There would appear, for human beings, a knowledge of God independent of the grace of God. Therefore, in this knowledge of God human beings are in rebellion against God's grace. This is totally unacceptable to

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<sup>1</sup> Barth's concept of religion will be discussed in interaction with Asian theology at length in the final chapter of the thesis.

Barth.<sup>2</sup>

However, Barth overlooks the fact that by means of the reconciliation of the cross, the entire created world and the whole of life should be viewed in the light of the Creator and the Redeemer. Consequently, there must be an *objective*, *actual*, and *visible* revelation in God's work which has *already* been exhibited to humans *simul iustus et peccator* in accordance with the grace of God. In his whole life Barth was completely against *a priori* knowledge of God. Yet although never having shared with or been in practical touch with Asian grass-roots Christians, who witnessed (and still witness) the saving work of God in the whole world, he seemed to have rejected *a priori* the reality and possibility of a knowledge of God within creation, although outside Jesus Christ personally. In his doctrine of the knowledge of God Barth seems to show a lack of interest in question of unbelief. This does not mean that the doctrine of Trinity (as the ontological foundation of the knowledge of God) is true only for those who belong here. Rather it means that 'here' is the only place where its truth may be grasped and truly articulated.<sup>3</sup> This effort, which seeks to exploit the possibility of knowing God away from 'here' in the reality of God Himself goes on apace. Whether it is still meaningful outside 'here', or rightly speaking, outside Barth's theological structure, is another matter, or not even his concern at all. Perhaps the battles within Christianity itself kept him too busy to take the challenge of interreligious dialogue. This has been his most vulnerable part, attacked by almost every Asian theologian. For example, the celebrated Indian theologian D. T. Niles, the then Chairman of the East Asia Christian Conference

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<sup>2</sup> Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> Hart, 'Karl Barth, the Trinity and Pluralism', 141.

(now the Christian Conference of Asia), recalled his frustrated *vis-à-vis* a conversation with Barth on indigenous Asian religions in 1935:

Barth talked to me about our Christian communities in Asia living in the midst of men of other faiths. In the course of the conversation, he said, "Other religions are just unbelief." I remember replying with the question, "How many Hindus, Dr. Barth, have you met?" He answered, "No one." I said, "How then do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?" He said, "A priori." I simply shook my head and smiled.<sup>4</sup>

In like manner, Song criticises the fact that, prior to coming to the pessimistic conclusion concerning religions other than Christianity Barth had 'never visited the non-western world during his lifetime.' Therefore, 'he never had first hand contact with or personal experience of Asian religions such as Buddhism.'<sup>5</sup> This is also the reason why Song ridicules Barth for having been amazed by such a normal thing as Bonhoeffer's abortive plan to visit Gandhi and considered it to be a very 'strange news'.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, even though Barth was contextually and historically right in insisting on the Christological limitation of revelation, he was still theologically mistaken in not doing full justice to the full teaching of Scripture and the real life experience of Asian Christians in respect of the knowledge of God.

Barth is convinced that revelation centres in Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate. That is to say, analogically, the periphery (the Scriptures) is around the sphere or circle (revelation) bearing witness to the centre (Christ). This is where the authenticity and authority come from. The authority totally depends on personal relationship of faith with the Christ of the Scriptures. However, in fact, the biblical witness to the Word is uneven. Then Barth seems to suggest, the

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<sup>4</sup> D. T. Niles, 'Karl Barth--A Personal Memory', *South East Asia Journal of Theology* Vol. 11 (Autumn, 1968), 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 191.

<sup>6</sup> Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 31; 261, n. 27 citing Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 330.

parts of Scripture that bear witness to Christ are more important than *other* parts that do not. As a result, passages in the Deutero-Isaiah (on King Cyrus), for example, so favoured by Song, which do not directly point to Christ but do disclose God's mercy and saving act outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, seem to play no important role for Barth. It will in turn negatively influence Barth's dealing with religions and cultures other than Christian.

The same indication can be found in Barth's treatments of 'other lights' and 'other words'. Barth is convinced that, on account of what Jesus Christ has done to the world, true words and lights can also be located outside Christianity as witnesses of God's self-impartation (rather than as the results of natural theology) which are attested in Scripture and accepted in the Church. There are true lights and words outside Scripture and the Church, but they are no more than witnesses and must always be placed below the criteria of Scripture and the confession of the Church. Notwithstanding, in uplifting them so, was Barth not actually saying that surely there are true lights and true words *outside* the pale of the Bible and the Church as long as they are kept *inside* them? In terms of the law of thought, can one maintain something and deny it in the same respect without either violating the law of noncontradiction, or becoming an intellectual schizophrenic?

Further, seen through Asian Christians' eyes, Barth is in fact suggesting that there are non-Christian truths so long as they are *Christian* in nature. There can be truths *outside* Christianity and in non-Christian religions as long as they remain *inside* the pale of Christianity. The apparent contradiction exists partly because Barth did not thoroughly (or had never been bothered by the question as to *how* to) come to term with non-Christocentric lights and words



before responding to others' criticism. In this sense, even although Barth is admirable in having taken criticism with seriousness and reacted to it in a constructive way by moderating his somewhat aggressive attitude towards 'other lights and words' than Christological, such statements have been made and are thus theologically meaningless outside Christianity.

As a matter of fact, Barth could have boldly admitted that there are genuine non-Christological lights and words beyond the criteria of Scripture and the Church in which persons *simul iustus et peccator* assemble. While they may exist outside the sphere of the Bible and the Church, they are certainly still *within* Christ, for Christ, according to Barth's doctrine of creation, is the Lord of the whole creation that is in God's providence. This admission would not have reduced the authenticity and significance of the words written and preached, but would have widened the 'point of contact' between Asian Christians and non-Christians.

The basis on which Barth's *analogia fidei* functions is the *act*, rather than the being, of God. To put it another way, Barth does not deem the knowledge of God as a knowledge of a static being, but as a dynamic divine-human relationship. To him, a being is tangible simply because it is active; it cannot be what it is without acting. Similarly, God can only become who He is and knowable in the light of this dynamic relationship between Himself and the human and his/her world. It is this dynamic ontology in the name of the *analogia fidei* that Barth uses in opposition to the static ontology in the name of the *analogia entis*. His wrestling against the *analogia entis* thus is essentially a wrestling against the conceptualisation of God in the static ontology. This ontological collision takes place in the form of the epistemological confrontation

between faith and reason. The victory of the *analogia fidei* over the *analogia entis* is none other than the victory of revealed knowledge of God in faith over natural knowledge of God by reason. Through the *analogia fidei* Barth has successfully safeguarded Christian faith from being demoted to metaphysical speculation.<sup>7</sup> In this respect Barth's achievement in Christianity is enormous. However, again for Asian Christians, if knowledge of God is to be transmittable between them and non-Christians for the purpose of dialogue or evangelism, total avoidance of using any form of the *analogia entis* is not feasible. If Asian Christians are to bear witness to the *triune* God to non-Christians, including atheists and other religious believers, they must to a certain extent use some forms of *analogia entis*, on top of *analogia fidei*, i.e. some 'static' conceptualised analogies or metaphors of likeness between God and His creatures. While all kinds of analogies and metaphors break down at some points they in reality have played highly successful roles in Asian Christian mission.

In Barth thus one particular question, which is essential to all Asian Christians, still remains unanswered: Is the Christian knowledge of God given in divine revelation a knowledge that can be made available through language to ordinary human, including non-Christian and atheists, understanding, or is it a mystic and inexpressible knowledge only accessible to those who are inspired in an extraordinary way by revelation itself? In Barth the latter seems to be the case, since the extraordinary faith-knowledge is different from any other ordinary human reason-knowledge. For him, they are two totally unlike things, between which nothing can be compared logically and/or conceptually. Here Barth appears to encourage Christians to take for granted such a faith-knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> Lee, *Karl Barth's Use of Analogy in His Church Dogmatics*, 146-147.

and to hold a hands-off attitude towards the conveyance of it to non-Christians. In the matter of the principle of *fides quaerens intellectum* (the *analogia fidei* against the *analogia entis*) Barth can be allegorised as an accountable yet stubborn soldier who is appointed to guard the stronghold of Christian faith. Under his vigilant and watchful guard, no heretic can in any way invade or sneak into the stronghold. But this results in a serious side-effect that even the heralds from inside the stronghold, who are ordered to announce good news to the external world, are not allowed to go outside either. Barth did not realise that so long as the *analogia entis* is not treated as a static *idée fixe* of the living God, it can be justified as another dynamic starting point of contact between Asian Christians and non-Christians. For Asian Christians, while the *analogia fidei* and the *analogia entis* are different, they are *de facto* different in function and not in essence. They are not utterly incomparable or incompatible, but can be supplementary to each other. If, for Barth, the *analogia fidei* is faith seeking understanding *who God is* within the Christian framework, then for Asian Christians the *analogia entis*, which bases solely on and derives exclusively from the *analogia fidei*, is faith seeking understanding *how we Christians can make this God known* to those who are outside the framework. In his exposition of Anselm's axiom 'faith seeking understanding' Barth unfortunately only grasps the former meaning, but loses the latter.

As a matter of fact, in his dealing with the problem of religion Barth indeed did not in any way provide Asian Christians with practical nor theoretical insight as to *how* grace, the unique component of the Christian religion, can penetrate into the heart of the people *in partibus infidelium* or of other religions. Even if he had done so, it would have been considered by Asian theologian like

Song as too Europe-orientated to be realistic for the Asian context. However, he did offer Asian Christians an immensely valuable reminder as to *what* must always be kept in place in face of adverse circumstances. What is the pity is that in Barth's efforts to provide a firm ontological-epistemological foundation for Christian knowledge of God, the eschatological dynamic of revelation and its spiritual character may be too conveniently overlooked. To put it another way, Barth, by virtue of his extraordinary personal experiences, could have been more careful and explicit in re-establishing the connection between God's self-revealing to the believing community and the events which confirm that God is the Lord of history. After all, Barth is convinced, that is the divine responsibility that the Holy Spirit alone has assumed and the eschatological purpose it intends to achieve, without human intervention. Such conviction unquestionably gives us the impression that Barth's interpretations of revelation overlook, if not disregard, Christian this-worldly responsibility.

One extra point respecting Barth's epistemology needs to be mentioned here. He points out, owing to God is knowable in the eternity of the Trinity that He becomes knowable to humans as an object in faith. By way of this Trinitarian knowledge of God the contemporary philosophical epistemologies can be avoided. That is to say, in Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit have bridged theologically an otherwise unbridgeable ontological-epistemological gulf between God and human beings. This overcomes the challenge of realism and objectivism. Furthermore, in highlighting the principle of *fides quaerens intellectum*, learned from Anselm, Barth also eliminates the dichotomy between 'reason' and 'faith' in the intellectual world, which makes the *analogia entis* superfluous. 'The knowledge

of God is different from all other knowledge, because its object is the living Lord of the knowing human beings.’<sup>8</sup> He is their Creator, from whom they come even before they know Him. He is their Reconciler, who through Jesus Christ in the Holy Ghost makes knowledge of Himself real and possible. He is also their Redeemer, who is Himself the future truth of all present knowledge of Himself. ‘He and none other is the object of the knowledge of faith.’<sup>9</sup>

Barth believes that knowledge of God of this kind is utterly *a posteriori* and is also the sole basis of the knowledge of the world and human beings. Nonetheless, he strangely holds an *a priori* knowledge of ‘all other objects’ of the world by saying: ‘We have all other objects as they are determined by the pre-arranged disposition and pre-arranged mode of our own existence. And this is so because we first of all consciously have ourselves.’<sup>10</sup> This epistemological discrepancy between the knowledge of God and knowledge of other objects again creates confusion for Asian Christians as to whether issues regarding other religions and cultures can be handled independently of the faith-knowledge of God.

In Barth’s dealings with human religion *true* and *false* are the sides between which people attempt to convey their response to the divine revelation.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, ‘it stands in a dialectical relationship to religion as a whole, calling from it a real response when the *Name*, and therefore the grace and forgiving love, of Jesus Christ is recognised’.<sup>12</sup> That is to say that religion, ‘in both its positive and negative aspects, can and does reflect revelation’; it thus bears

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<sup>8</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Veitch, ‘Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth’, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

witness to, or even becomes a sign of, God's presence among human beings.<sup>13</sup> However, this witnessing character will become manifest only at the same time as revelation 'attracts to itself (elevates) all who are ready to respond to the proclamation of the Gospel.'<sup>14</sup> Under the circumstances, 'there is a sense in which false religion has already diverged from revelation, although its very existence, in stark contrast with true religion, points to a time when it stood in a closer relationship to revelation.'<sup>15</sup> Viewed from this angle, 'human religions become the endeavour to substantiate something which has already lost its particularity, and has deviated from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ'.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, 'true' religion viewed in this sense 'is the fulfilment of the word of God as it is heard and responded to in the proclamation of Gospel.'<sup>17</sup> However, there is an obvious contradiction between Barth's understanding of religion and reconciliation concerning the legitimacy of Christianity and salvation of other religions.

On the one hand, in his concept of religion, Barth argues that God's revelation places all religions under judgement, but, on the other hand, in his doctrine of reconciliation, he insists on a Christocentric ontology of the universal scope of Christianity which declares that all people are already reconciled in Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> The first statement makes the revelation in Jesus Christ proclaimed by the Church no more closely related to Christianity than to other

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Religions from the Perspective of Christian Theology and the Self-Interpretation of Christianity Relation to the Non-Christian Religions,' *Modern Theology*, 9.3 (1993), 291.

religions, whereas the second statement seems to advocate an *a priori* universalism. This is particularly unclear viewed from an Asian Christian angle. In the section on ‘religion as unbelief’, Barth argues that one cannot, by oneself, arrive at the truth about God; by themselves human beings are only good enough to be idolaters.<sup>19</sup> The opposition of Christianity to other religions, as Barth observes, is rooted in the different understanding of the ultimate form of the only, but at the same time triune, God’s concrete self-manifestation and of its relevance for conceiving the identity of God Himself.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, in arguing for the ‘true religion’ Barth esteems the view of faith as Christians’ self-confidence bestowed by the triune God as the best way of dealing with other faiths.<sup>21</sup> To Barth, as Johnson argues, ‘revelation is self-authenticating and self-interpreting--the object of revelation is simply there and has to be accepted as such’.<sup>22</sup> This is, of course, the ‘positivism of revelation’ about which Bonhoeffer complains. Therefore, even though Bonhoeffer’s acrimonious criticism of Barth, as advancing a positivism of revelation, cannot be fully justified insofar as Barth has never pursued a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ attitude towards revelation, Bonhoeffer certainly pinpoints that, as far as revelation and religion are concerned, Barth’s accents on the *what* and *how* are overtly unbalanced.<sup>23</sup> Barth makes every effort to rebuke the human inclination for self-justification in all religions, with no exemption of Christianity, and then in highlighting the unique *what*, i.e., *grace*, in the self-authenticating revelation of God that can be found only in Christianity, but he says very little about *how* such

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 189.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

precious grace can be received outside Christianity by non-Christians.<sup>24</sup> Although Barth does briefly remark on the question of the experiential how in ‘the final pages of the *Church Dogmatics*’,<sup>25</sup> those remarks on the ‘how’ as a whole is like a theoretical and hypothetical necessity rather than actual concerns out of his own practical experience. Therefore, in arguing that in taking the ‘what’ of Christianity as a priority Barth did not minimise the ‘how’, Johnson himself does not deny that the ‘how’ is an appendix to or a by-product of the later theological concentration of Barth. The main reason why Barth had to deal with the ‘how’ is simply because his ‘focus on true humanity would not permit him to give up on the question of the “how.”’<sup>26</sup> And the ‘how’ in the entire theology of Barth is precisely not only out of proportion with the what, but also was never put into effect in his lifetime *in actu* (in terms of inter-religious dialogue). As a result, he leaves almost no room for Christian apologetics, a daily theological commodity for Asian Christians, which may lead to a meaningful conversation and discussion of the *what* of Christian faith with non-Christians.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, what Barth has argued against sinful humanity restrains him from moving any further, because it allows no room for human autonomy in receiving grace. However, the response to and the acceptance of what is given in revelation must be a response and acceptance made *by* human beings in faith. For revelation cannot be what it is if its substance is not revealed to *human beings*, and it cannot be revelation either if it does not require human response

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



and acceptance. In other words, there is an irrefutable *anthropological* aspect in revelation. This, nonetheless, does not succumb to Song's anthropocentric self-confidence, which is so denounced by Barth, which makes revelation *immanent* in human religion, degrades revelation to a human possession, and thus puts grace at human disposal. These two anthropological points of view must not be equated. The anthropological dimension (response) to revelation (in faith) in Barth's concept of religion is a matter of cognition, which Barth is either unaware of or reluctant to admit, whereas that in Song's is inherent in humanity, which can be carried into any religion. In brief, the anthropological dimension in Barth is *ontic* in nature, while that in Song is *noetic*.

Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God as a whole thus can be regarded as a profound concern with a number of *what*-questions challenged from the different theological traditions within Christianity itself: *What* is God's revelation? *What* are the objective and subjective realities and possibilities of divine revelation? *What* are the ontological and epistemological foundations of such a revelation through which humans come to know God? *What* is the difference between revealed and natural knowledge of God? *What* differentiates other religions from Christianity to be regarded as true religion? And *what* then is the real knowledge of God? In answering these questions in response to their challenges, Barth has not only pinpointed the errors of those theological traditions, but has also sought and engaged in their reconstruction and regeneration.<sup>28</sup> Despite the side effects, arising from Barth's contention of 'the ongoing need to avoid the secularizing and contextualizing which would

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<sup>28</sup> G. W. Bromiley, 'The Influence of Barth after World War II', in *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 19.

attenuate Christianity as a civil religion or a cultural adoption',<sup>29</sup> and certainly cause various difficulties for Asian Christians in face of non-Christians, he has undoubtedly upheld the Christian identity. Barth has helped Christians, especially Asian Christians, to a better comprehension of what they are chosen to undertake witness to the divine revelation of God in Christ according to the biblical testimony together with supplementary wisdom of catholic councils, confessions and church fathers.<sup>30</sup>

## II. Criticisms of Song

It has been seen that throughout the discussions of Song's theological methodologies as well as theological content there constantly appears the same strong resistance against Western traditional theology. For he thinks that traditional theology is too deep to fathom for the Asian ordinary people, even for Christians, and does not at all resonate with the Asian people's life experience that is full of pain and suffering. Asian Christians often come in awe of the splendid architecture of traditional theology without knowing what to do with it. Even those Asian Christians who have set foot in the vast western theological literature in the hope of locating something useful, or at least relevant, to their actual life more often than not end up in great disappointment if not despair. Therefore, Song assumes responsibility and determines to make theology that is 'at its most *unsophisticated* and yet at its most profound, at its *simplest* and yet at its deepest, at its most *unadorned* and yet at its most moving'.<sup>31</sup> His aim is to make his theological response not exclusively in relation to the history of Israel

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>31</sup> Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 11.

or to the history of Christianity in the West, but in relation to the various communities in Asia.

Such an attempt is indeed praiseworthy and deserves commendation, although it entails certain dangers which seriously undermine the Christian foundation. He tries to offer alternative theological approaches to the knowledge of the Reality beyond all realities, and to knowledge of the Being as the life resource of human beings, but for Asian Christians he endangers their Christian identity and heritage. First, on the one hand, in advancing third-eye theology, Song asserts that *within* Christianity Asian Christians should be encouraged to read the Bible with their own eyes, to interpret the Gospel with their own understanding, to establish an Asian faith with their own experience independent of the western standard, since biblical words are historically and culturally conditioned. For example, Song claims: 'The faith of the Reformation is the faith seen through German eyes. However definitive, influential, and far-reaching the Reformation faith may have been, there is no reason why Christians who are not heirs to the German spirit must see and interpret Christian faith through German eyes.'<sup>32</sup> Consequently, 'those who were not born with German eyes should not be prohibited from seeing Christ in different ways. They must be encouraged to see Christ through Chinese eyes, Japanese eyes, Asian eyes, African eyes, Latin American eyes'.<sup>33</sup>

There can be no common measure for the interpretation of Scripture because there is no absolute truth in it either. This will invite Christian (biblical) relativism within Christian tradition. On the other hand, the fact that Song

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

encourages Christians to see and do theology with a third eye by stepping *outside* Christianity to seek for interreligious spirituality will result in Christian syncretism. Either relativism or syncretism or both will put the faith and identity of Asian Christian at stake. Moreover, Song insists that the Truth cannot be grasped simply through the interpretation of the Bible by Christian theologians; Christian truths are not identical to the ultimate Truth. One does not know what the Truth is nor expect what it is to be until one's mind is enlightened by the Truth, because the Truth, like revelation that always comes to human beings at the moment they least anticipate it, can only be obtained in the status of *satori* (intuition). Song's notion of the Truth gives rise to agnosticism on the one side and subjectivism on the other, and again imperils the essence of Christianity.

It is not surprising if one ever wonders what exactly Song's theology of transposition is seeking to transpose. In his speculations concerning Christian traditions most of the essential substances of the Christian faith, such as the authority of the Bible and *Heilsgeschichte* that is disclosed to human beings by way of Israeli and Christian history, have been adjudged as centrism to be jettisoned or as roadblocks to be removed. Clues may be unearthed in his theology of story. In story theology Song declares that the narratives collected in the Christian Bible are merely culturally conditioned; the authority of their teachings is not propositionally given, but is given according to the context. Unlike those biblical narratives, familiar only to a certain number of people confined to a circle called Christianity, indigenous Asian folk tales and fairy stories should receive greater theological attention because they contain something culturally, spiritually, and universally deep. Could these indigenous

Asian stories in their original forms or the interpretations of them be what he intends to transpose in terms of the three meanings of transposition--shift in time and space, translation (communication), and incarnation? The answer must be negative. The problem is that if one can read those stories *with one's own eyes* in one's own context (time and space), transposition of those stories is impossible and superfluous. In other words, those stories and folk tales cannot and do not need to be shifted, translated, and incarnated in the first place, for lack of an *objective* hermeneutic basis (since Song's attitude towards truth is basically agnostic and subjectivistic), and they are supposed to be contextually self-evident to each individual reader.

With regard to the theological substance, apparently, Song's Jesusology is unbiblically arbitrary. The Jesus portrayed under his pen makes very little contribution to the suffering majority of Asian people, for what they really need is the Christ, so genuinely attested by Paul, through Him 'God reconciled us to Himself',<sup>34</sup> rather than another example portrayed by Song's 'theological imagination'.<sup>35</sup> If the purpose of Christology is the *pou sto* of the knowledge of God--according to Jesus, no one can come to the knowledge of God apart from Him--<sup>36</sup> then this function is certainly out of favour with Song's Jesusology. For Song, '*God is the story of Jesus. And Jesus is the story of the people*' and *vice versa*.<sup>37</sup> People have now become the starting point of the knowledge of God.<sup>38</sup>

Since Song does not regard Jesus as the objective reality and possibility of

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<sup>34</sup> 2 *Corinthians*, 5: 18.

<sup>35</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, x.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *John* 14: 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Song's doctrine of the knowledge of God will be explored in detail later.

the knowledge of God, He becomes only the best inspiration or an example *par excellence* for those who struggle against political authorities for national independence or civil rights. Therefore, in Song's writings, Jesus, who discloses moral strength in His struggle with the religious and political powers that opposed Him, is pictured as a political and ethical hero often paralleled with Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., who also 'meet violence with moral strength.'<sup>39</sup> The moral strength that empowers Jesus, Gandhi and King, according to Song, stems from 'the Creator Spirit'.<sup>40</sup> In saying so, Song suggests that every ordinary human being is potentially capable of becoming another Jesus or Gandhi, as long as he or she is inspired by the same Spirit.

It has been pointed out that Song's concept of the Spirit is charismatic and pragmatic in nature. Like Song, Paul does not restrict the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the occasional experience of the few, for example, only to religious leaders, but it is for *all of God's people*, men and women, old and young, manifesting in various ways. However, in David Wenham's words, according to Paul 'the Holy Spirit is not experienced only individually, for the Christian fellowship as a whole, the body of Christ, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit inspires the corporate life of the body, giving different gifts to different people for the benefit of the whole (1 Cor. 3:16).'<sup>41</sup> In other words, by 'all of God's people' Paul in fact means those 'who are in Christ',<sup>42</sup> and 'who confess with their lips that "Jesus is the Lord" and believe in their heart that God

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<sup>39</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 27f.

<sup>41</sup> David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 230.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

raised Him from the dead'.<sup>43</sup>

Here, unlike Song, Paul sets forth a decisive intrinsic criterion--confession with lips *and heart* that Jesus is the Lord--above the extrinsic phenomena, to discern things that are achieved with the help of the Holy Spirit from those are done out of selfish human desires at the expense of others, on the ground that 'all things are lawful to me', including immorality.<sup>44</sup> Song neglects the fact that without this important criterion one cannot distinguish the genuine gifts of the Spirit from the products of other human-manipulated spirits simply by judging their extrinsic similarities. For example, Song is well aware of severe danger in the way that the Spirit is handled in Chinese philosophy. He points out that, in seeking to regulate the Spirit through acts of will and control its movements by concentration of the mind, Chinese philosophers have in this way 'domesticated' the Spirit. As a result, what they have achieved in fact is not the domestication of the Spirit but the concentration of the human mind and control of it by sheer human will. 'This in itself can be affirmed as a way of self-discipline and self-understanding. But in its extreme form the practice often leads to isolation from others and from the community. In the end it also disposes of the need of God.'<sup>45</sup> However, Song does not, or perhaps cannot, go any farther to specify on what basis one can discern the differences.

In want of that decisive criterion, the evil, that is always under the cloak of a peace-loving maker, can hardly be disclosed. Barth certainly had this important criterion in mind when he called for the German pastors and congregation's reaction against Hitler who had been propagandised by the

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<sup>43</sup> *Romans* 10: 4-13.

<sup>44</sup> *1 Corinthians* 6: 12-20.

<sup>45</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 294-295.

German Christians as ‘a gift from God’. This is why, in his doctrine of the knowledge of God, Barth has to stress the Holy Spirit as the subjective aspect of revelation which motivates the human heart to profess Jesus Christ, the objective aspect, as the Lord of all in order to prevent the real knowledge of God from human manipulation.

As for Song’s doctrine of the knowledge of God, it is obvious that without the objective and subjective dimensions of divine revelation, Song, in line with Schleiermacher, has to *subjectify* knowledge of God as being the inner capability for suffering inherent in humanity, viz., as being ‘in the depth of our spirit where our agonies and expectations lie’.<sup>46</sup> This rules out the importance of historical realities. The legitimate way of knowing God on the human side only originates from the capacity for this inner experience enabled by humanity, which is identical with what God assumes in Jesus. Song believes that ‘to be human is to suffer, and God knows that. This is why God suffers too. *Suffering is where God and human beings meet.*’<sup>47</sup> Having subjectified God’s presence as the awareness of suffering, Song, in coincidence with Aquinas, ineluctably *objectifies* human conception of God by an *analogia*. However, instead of the doctrine of the *analogia entis*, in which *ens* is the catalytic agent which brings together human beings and the Absolute Being, Song substitutes it with *passio*. Hence the foremost principle of Song’s knowledge of God is only derivable from the *analogia passionis*. Yet, the *analogia passionis* is not derivable in a theologically logical sense that presents the relationship of God to human beings, but rather in the reverse sense that the knowledge of God is

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<sup>46</sup> Song, *The Compassionate God*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 115 [italics mine].



simply an apt or adequate expression of the waxing and waning of the innate experience of humanity.

Song's overemphasis on the core experience of suffering and humanity as *the* common denominator of all religions, which is obviously a theory in favour of religious pluralism, may concede to some kind of Lockean *empiricism* and Comtian *positivism*. The former would hold that *a posteriori* experience of suffering is the sole source of the knowledge of God as opposed to *a priori* knowledge in revelation, whereas the latter would maintain that the highest form of religion in its revolution is the religion of universal humanity devoid of reference to God. With Christians, therefore, genuine suffering must have substance. What really counts is not 'suffering' *in itself* regardless of *for what* the Christian suffers. On the one hand, God's suffering is not merely 'the identity with human suffering in the suffering of the suffering Jesus', but it also means that this human suffering of Jesus brings suffering into the being of God.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the Christian's suffering must be both for the 'freedom *from* evils and oppressions--in a word, sin--and above all...*for* an authentically human life with God and with our human companions--in a word, [the] humanity' renewed in Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Under the strong influence of his own concept of the knowledge of God, it is not unanticipated that Song's theology of transposition and his attitude to evangelism are fairly inconsistent and even contradictory, considering his Universalist knowledge of God through the aforementioned *analogia passionis*. On the one hand, in developing a transpositional theology, he *prima facie*

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<sup>48</sup> Willis, Jr., *Theism, Atheism and the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Green ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, 12.

concerned himself with the missiological question respecting how biblical truths and apostolic faith, which was originally introduced by the greatest apostle Paul ‘from Palestine to the Greco-Roman world and eventually to the rest of Europe and the West’, could be restored and transposed *back* to Asia again, having been dominated thereafter by the west.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, however, Song rejects not only the theory of *Heilsgeschichte* in Scripture, but also its substance--Israel as the promise and Jesus Christ as the centre, mediator, and culmination of God’s salvation revealed to humankind. He believes that such a *Christocentric* interpretation is a Christian roadblock which precludes God’s salvation from being shared by those other than Christians, and from being linked to world history.

In order to clear away the roadblock Song realises that he, in keeping with all Western pluralists,<sup>51</sup> is bound to place himself against the central tenet of the Christian faith--that God is revealed exclusively in Jesus Christ--in order to proceed from the *Christocentric* to a Unitarian *theocentric* approach to a universal salvation. It is *God* alone who created and came to the world; it is *God* alone who became flesh in humanity. While God was firstly incarnate in Jesus, then through Him in all human beings, the sequence has no specific meaning at all in that what really counts is creation whereby all creatures are embraced by the providence of God. God’s creation and incarnation must be seen as independent of the *Heilsgeschichte* promulgated in and by the Christian Bible and religion simply because they are individual *historical* events in the midst of His universal salvation. This logically exposes the deficient façade

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<sup>50</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> The leading figure is John Hick who highly advances Christian pluralism in *God the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973; rev. ed. London: Fount, 1977).

of his concept of Christian mission. Song is ambivalent about Christian mission in that he holds that the differences between Christianity and other religious traditions must be understood as supplementary rather than antagonistic.

As a matter of fact, Song's rejection of the *content* of the *Heilsgeschichte* exterminates the *invariable* in Scripture and in Christianity. The invariable, that needs to be transposed into Asia, will enable people today to grasp Jesus not only as a past experience, but also a present experience of Jesus living, acting, dying, and rising from the dead.<sup>52</sup> Fundamentally, the rejection puts an end to the necessity, and possibility, of his 'theology of transposition' in its entirety. For he fails to recognise that God's acts of creation and incarnation are integral parts of His continuous salvational history; they are indeed *historic* yet by no means purely *historical*. He also fails to see salvation history actualised through the chosen nation Israel and that the elected person Jesus is His promise to all nations and human beings, first received by Christians and yet to be passed on to the rest of the world through their mission. Therefore, the *Heilsgeschichte* is in no wise close-ended but *open-ended*. The conviction, which the previous chapters have argued that Barth claims, that human beings are incapable of knowing God's revelation in nature prior to the one revealed in the Word of God does not mean that God's power has been diminished; it is simply due to human incapability blinded by sin. Finally, Song declines to admit that even though no single Christian tradition represents or contains all Christian truths, but only a batch of them, each tradition has an important role to play. In other words, while in evangelisation Western missionaries to Asia

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<sup>52</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 18.

might have made it considerably more difficult for the Asian Christian to appreciate the faith in his or her own context, every individual Christian must have become acquainted with Christianity and its theology in the first place through one particular Christian church (or tradition). This is the reason why Christianity does not teach its believers and churches to take salvation history for granted, rather, the Christian faith urges them to broaden and relate it to world history by evangelism in the hope that through faith in the special revelation all human beings will be able to follow Paul in proclaiming: ‘Ever since the creation of the world His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things He has made.’<sup>53</sup>

The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan would completely disagree with Song’s indictment of Christian mission as a ‘militant mission’. For most of the Western missionaries dedicated their *whole* life to Taiwan<sup>54</sup>--at first a *terra incognita* where they arrived in wonder and faced people’s hostility, and at last a *terra matris* where they died in love and with people’s respect--whereas some Taiwanese people prefer to emigrate to more civilised or wealthy countries. In a booklet, published in 1986 in commemoration of its 120th anniversary, the

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<sup>53</sup> *Romans* 1: 20.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Barclay (1849-1935), for example, a Glaswegian missionary and the founder of Tainan Theological College and Seminary (1876), the first university in Taiwan, arrived in 1875 at the age of 26 and died in the country. In a biography written in memory of him, the author indirectly brings the reader’s attention to how Barclay was appreciated and honoured by the Taiwanese people in his funeral for what he had contributed: ‘The funeral took place on the afternoon of 8th October.... Dr. Barclay was too great for us.... The long impressed service.... began at two o’clock, and went on till half-past four. The first address was read by the representative of His Excellency the Governor General of Formosa [now Taiwan]. He was followed by a representative of the Governor of the Tainan Province, and Mayor of Tainan in person.... Then came representatives of the various Church organisations.... [T]he prevailing spirit was of quiet thankfulness for so noble an example of single-hearted devotion to the cause of Christ. The service over, the students once more bore out the coffin, and the long procession re-formed. The boys and girls of our two schools were drawn up along the sides of the road. Behind them pressed crowds of silent spectators. stretching away in front as far as the eye could see went a long chant of bearers carrying the wreaths....’ (Edward Band, *Barclay and Formosa* [Tokyo: Christian Literature Society, 1936; reissued ed., Tainan: Tainan Theological College and Seminary, 1985], 200-201).

Taiwanese Presbyterians show a great regard for the first British and Canadian Presbyterian missionaries, particularly for their contribution to Taiwan in the areas of medical science, education, caring for the minorities, and social welfare system, which modernised Taiwanese society.<sup>55</sup> The booklet justly points out:

Although the [Taiwanese] church is still heavily coloured by the Western [Christian traditions] considering its theology, liturgy, hymns, architecture, and ecclesiastic system,... [t]o be honest, neither the missionaries nor the first Taiwanese Christians are to blame for this; it is the inevitable conflict between “faith and culture”. No cause should be given for much criticism and it is fully understandable that the missionaries expressed to the Taiwanese people their experiences of Jesus Christ by those languages, modes, and ideologies with which they were familiar, and by introducing their faith and the ecclesiastic system formed and constructed in their own cultures.<sup>56</sup>

Obviously, in the eyes of the Taiwanese Presbyterians their mission on the whole is a mission of bearing witness to God’s love to Taiwan by way of loving commitment, and by no means a militant nor cultural invasion. ‘By way of medical services and education’ they ‘dedicated themselves to loving the despised, oppressed, and the marginalised people’ of Taiwan.<sup>57</sup> It is also no exaggeration to say that Song himself is among the beneficiaries, despite his reluctance to admit it. This is what Jesus and the apostles meant by euvangelion, good news.

It cannot be doubted that Song’s theology (and Asian theology overall), which excludes Christian traditions and doctrines (in both the biblical and ecclesiastical sense) solely by virtue of experience in historical reality, reflects the needs of the Asians. It suggests that traditions and doctrines must have come out of the blue, bereft of their historical setting and milieu. In fact the

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<sup>55</sup> The General Assembly, *Understanding the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan* (Tainan: Jen-Kuang Press, 1986), 94-99.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

history of Christianity and its doctrines has invalidated the presupposition that ‘the task of constructive Christian theology can be taken up as if nothing had changed’.<sup>58</sup> This is because the Christian church ‘has always taken a shape related to the culture in which it is set’, and its traditions and doctrines are no exception.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, if one believes that the compassionate God’s communion of love has been accomplished and is still being carried out in history by the suffering Messiah one should not deny that the mighty deeds of God were also at work in the history of the formation of biblical and ecclesiastical traditions and doctrines.<sup>60</sup>

So far as Christian knowledge of God is concerned, the significance of traditions and doctrines is not simply as a cluster of *a priori* principles or self-evident truths about God, but as witnesses to His act and being in the history of biblical Israel and in Jesus Christ. They are the prophets’, apostles’, and Christian predecessors’ witnesses to God’s salvation on the basis of their *historical* and *contextual* experiences through the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit. In accusing Christian traditions and doctrines of ignoring historical realities in knowledge of God, Song himself, therefore, cannot be innocent of the same indictment that he has imposed on the accused--Western and traditional theology.

Song’s concept of true religion is *a posteriori* and pragmatic. For him, no religion that can be considered true unless it inspires the powerless masses to rise up for a social and political change. Or to put it another way, any religion

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<sup>58</sup> Colin Gunton, ‘Preface’ to *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xi.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

which inspires the powerless masses to rise up for a social and political change can be considered true, because such a religion must contain some kind of ‘prophetic and saintly elements’.<sup>61</sup> He also calls for the need of self-reformation of religion *per se* in imitation of the biblical prophets. ‘Religion itself needs to change for the world to be able to change. And a change called for in a religion must be a radical change, a change with profound theological implications for our relations with God and other people.’<sup>62</sup> However, the problem with this point of view is that, again like his Pneumatology, there is no *objective criterion* to judge whether the ‘socio-political change’ as well as the ‘religious change’ are to be carried out for the benefit of *all*, or simply for the interest of a few. Then, Song’s concept of the true religion can be easily misunderstood as ‘common interests’ of a group of people. There are people who take their common interests as seriously as religious belief and so will certainly ‘rise up for a social and political change’ for their own sake, but at the expense of others, as there are beneficial as well as noxious common interests. When common interests are identified with religions to commit to, to fight for, and even to die for, it becomes neither more nor less than *idolatry*! No one will ever doubt the fact that in the past and in the present, in politics and in religion, the world has never been short of people who are always ready to fight or to die for money, power, and position *at all costs*. This certainly includes another incidental that Song never wishes to happen--the use of religious powers in politics, or *vice versa*. As a matter of fact, idolatry of this kind has been anticipated by Barth when he tenders the unconditional saving

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<sup>61</sup> Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, 199.

<sup>62</sup> Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God*, 96.

*grace* of God manifested in Jesus Christ as *the* criterion for true religion. In default of this essential criterion, Song's concept of true religion has become extremely misleading, rather than helpful, to Asian Christians.

In conclusion, far from being a sincere reading of the Christian text from within the Asian context, Song's banana-like Asian theology, implied by the title of Yung's book--yellow skin (linguistic expression) with off-white pulp (content),<sup>63</sup> is simply another *rechauffé* of the synchronic post-Enlightenment scepticism (in both the rational and empirical sense) reading of Scripture and post-liberal (Schleiermacherian subjective) conception of the Christian faith, and a sequence of trite Western pluralist critiques of Christian traditions 'heavily colored with Asian illustrations.'<sup>64</sup> Like his own criticism of Barth, that Barth never had *first-hand* experience of Asian religions before coming to the pessimistic conclusion about other religions, Song's theology is not first-hand either. His so-called *Asian* theology is developed, in the west coast of the United States of America, through reading, analysing and explicating Asian stories or folk tales, rather than through the experience of personal participation in Asian people's suffering. Therefore, Song's theology is a second-hand theology, which is inconsistent with the 'theology of incarnation'--what he himself calls the centre of his theology. At best, Song's theology, in spite of his insistence to be really Asian, can be more adequately depicted as 'a creative "marriage" between a secularized pluralistic Western theology and Asian cultural and religious forms.'<sup>65</sup> As far as Asian Christians are concerned, it is not unjust to conclude that Song's theology is fictive and thus, in Yung's words,

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 240-241.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.



‘quite missiologically unrealistic’.<sup>66</sup> This is particularly evident in Song’s deprecation of the *Heilsgeschichte* and evangelism. Indeed it makes him unable to confess along with Paul, who is honoured by Song himself as the first one on earth to transpose the Gospel, and whose example must be taken seriously by all Christians: ‘I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.’<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to Barth’s concern with a succession of *what*-questions, Song’s theology by and large can be seen as an enthusiastic attempt to answer a series of sequential *how*-questions. At first, *how* could Christianity be made totally available to every single Asian person? *How* could the Christian traditions be assimilated to Asian cultures? *How* could Christian theology be accepted independent of western theological jargons? Nevertheless, he must have been so frustrated by the dense, or even formidable traditional theology (or the traditional way of doing theology) that he had to discard it entirely without further examining the potential value of Christian heritage. His line of thought, then, has turned diametrically to such questions as *how* to create an Asian theology that does not rely on the Bible but adapts other religious traditions? *How* can a traditional Christian be converted unknowingly into a Christian pluralist, or a religious pluralist with a Christian background? And finally, *how* can all religions be syncretised as an unprecedentedly *new* religion? Frankly, to offer answers to questions like these has gone beyond the range of a *Christian* theologian. What makes Song go astray is that he has been unable to realise fully on *what* basis he stands, and exactly *what* he is looking for when

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>67</sup> *Romans* 1: 16.

contemplating all these questions. The *what* of Christianity and the faith of its believers are what Barth in his doctrine of the knowledge of God has endeavoured to make clear. Being himself one of Asian Christians who will have to bear witness to the triune God in the religious pluralist Asia as their life-long obligation, the present writer believes that at the present stage it is imperative to pay more attention to the *what* than the *how*, so as not to concede to the social tendency to determine our faith in the changeable society. Only when the *what* is genuinely and deeply reflected can the *how* be adequately and sufficiently accomplished.

### **III. Critical Comparison and Integration between Song and Barth**

As we have seen in Song's teaching of the knowledge of God, and in Asian theology as a whole, the overriding theme is nothing else but the *people* (the alternative term is humanity) who suffer politically, culturally and religiously. It is owing to their historical and religious experience which all countries of Asia have in common in association with the destructive impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism by the West, the oppression by the indigenous autocracy, and the religiously pluralist atmosphere encompassing them. It is true and colonial powers can be somewhat hypocritical, for example, when the British government is proud of being the first government on earth to protect animals under the national Constitution following the establishment of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1923, the government seems to have forgotten the fact that there were still numberless Africans and Asians under the heel of British colonisation. No matter what sort of colonialism or how

imposed, they were imploring for self-determination and independence until the late twentieth-century.

Overwhelmed by such complex experience it is unsurprising that the Asian theologian, perhaps unwittingly, negatively evaluates traditional Christian faith and theology wherein God is considered an all-powerful God who forbids His people from worshipping other gods. Song, for instance, detests what has been held in traditional theology that in the drama of salvation God is always the leading actor. 'It was initiated by God, is carried out by God, and is to be brought to fulfilment by God. From beginning to end God alone plays the active role. The salvation drama is God's solo act'.<sup>68</sup> whereas, human beings are completely out of sight as only the *ens rationis* of God. In this regard Yung rightly points out that Asian theologies as a whole tend to so overreact against colonialism or neo-colonialism that they may mislead Asian Christians into disassociation from their theological ancestry and heritage, and naturally endanger them to the detriment of their Christian identity.<sup>69</sup> In renouncing the validity of Western theology for Asian Christians, Asian theologians must be sober and honest in answer to the question of whether they have projected onto Western theology personal iconoclastic sentiments against Western colonialism. Among those criticised, Barth has been one of the most frequently chosen targets by the Asian theologian due largely to his assertion in his early writings that the infinite qualitative *diastasis* between the 'Wholly Other' and the totally corrupted humanity is never bridgeable. This seems to have pessimistically dichotomised God and the world of human beings, and have profoundly

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<sup>68</sup> Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 210.

<sup>69</sup> Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 62.

disappointed those who have been earnestly looking, for decades, for inter-religious dialogue and political liberation in Asia. Seen through the eyes of the Asian theologian, human beings in Barth's theology are deprived of freedom from religious faith in their spiritual life and potentially from politics in their secular life; they are confined to religion as well as to politics by God and politicians. In Song's critique, such a theology 'is to relegate human beings to a passive state, not capable of playing a positive role in God's design of salvation.'<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, according to Yung's reading of Song, 'religious faith and theology of this kind produce an identity that makes believers inactive not only in matters of faith but also in their social and political responsibilities'.<sup>71</sup> No wonder 'how easy it is, then, for them to become, on the one hand, objects of exploitation and, on the other, unconscious or unwilling collaborators of evil social and political forces!'<sup>72</sup>

For Song, the spiritual dimension of life intersects with its socio-political dimension. 'Justice is a socio-political demand as well as a spiritual quality.'<sup>73</sup> True as Song's deprecation may be, nevertheless, in the light of the previous chapters of the present thesis, it is unjustifiable to level accusations of this sort at Barth without reference to the storms he weathered during the two world wars and to his later *opus magnum*, the *Church Dogmatics* and other pre-war works. Doubtless, it is correct *de facto* and *de jure* for each individual human being to claim equal political, religious, and cultural freedom to the utmost extent in the world since all creatures belong to God. It is the life of human 'free

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 207.

detachment', <sup>74</sup> for it seems to be a 'direct and practical manner of life disjoining from the control of God'. But Song fails to take into account the 'krisis of human freedom and detachment' <sup>75</sup> that deeply concern Barth: Will freedom not become visionless and prodigal without substantial content? '[W]ho will venture not merely to think the thought of freedom but actually to live under its guidance?' <sup>76</sup> The content of genuine freedom, according to Barth, must be nothing else but one's own Christian identity and faith in God through Christ. In clinging to our identity, we as Christians are 'free to apprehend what is certain and living and eternal; depending only upon the forgiveness of sins and therefore able to direct our conduct with real clarity of insight; our reverence for all relative values and factors...to make genuine and proper use of them;' and to be delivered 'from the whole compulsion of authority and regimentation, from the whole multiplicity of godlike powers and authorities which make up our world'. <sup>77</sup>

Just as, set forth in Chapter One, for the sake of real Christian faith and identity Barth becomes an iconoclast against the idols of culture and civilisation of liberal Protestantism, of rationalism of Roman Catholicism, and of the national socialism of the Nazis and, their allies, the German-Christians so he is a constructor, seen in Chapter Two, of the Christian identity by reinforcing Jesus Christ as the centre of knowledge of God, of human beings, and of the world which can only be known through faith--in the process of *fides quaerens intellectum*. He would answer in the negative to those who contend that

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<sup>74</sup> Barth, *The Epistles to the Romans*, 503.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 502.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

political liberation, social reformation, and inter-religious dialogue should receive prominence at the expense of the Christian identity. As far as the Christian is concerned, devoid of the Christian identity and faith in the God who is the source of freedom, human freedom may turn into blind slavery to social tendency. For Barth considers that '*man's freedom is his as the gift of God*'<sup>78</sup> and '[w]e can speak about man only by speaking about God.'<sup>79</sup> 'Taken together', Webster suggests, 'these two convictions mean that the assertion that human freedom is ingredient with our talk of God's freedom is not convertible into an assertion that human freedom, known by us on the basis of self-reflection, is ontologically or epistemologically prior.'<sup>80</sup>

Notwithstanding, as Chapter Two has demonstrated, after all his hostility to fallen humanity, in his later thought Barth moves a step further to claim that by the reconciliation of Jesus Christ the old and collapsed humanity was crucified with Him and perished, and an entire new humanity has appeared. The *new* humanity is not the *reparatio quidditatis* of the old nor the 'full' of the imperfect as the Asian theologian would rather obtain, but new in the literal sense.<sup>81</sup> In this case Gunton is absolutely right when he calls our attention to the fact that: 'the continuing vitality of Christian thought has made a contribution, from the engagement by theologians like Karl Barth with the cultural crises associated with both world wars to the part played by Christian faithfulness and sometimes intransigence.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Gift of Freedom: Foundation of Evangelical Ethics' in *The Humanity of God*, 69.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>80</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 104.

<sup>81</sup> Fabella ed., 'The final Statement', 156ff.

<sup>82</sup> Gunton, 'Preface', xi.

For Barth knows that by way of His revelation and grace in Jesus Christ, God has spoken to the human ‘here and now’ as well as He spoke to the Christian predecessors there and then. In other words, Barth’s doctrine of the knowledge of God, indeed his theology by and large, and Barth’s understanding of knowledge of God rose from the deliberation of the problems and issues *inter alia* that confronted him and his contemporaries in their time. He had never intended to contrive a theology universally available for all Christians. It is unnecessary and impossible, insofar as Barth is convinced that by and in His triune existence *Deus dixit*, God has spoken! Song and other Asian theologians overlook the *active* being and act of the triune God--manifested in the Son’s ‘appointment, calling, and commissioning of the Twelve’ in the first century, and in the Holy Spirit’s ‘gathering, upholding, and sending of the Christian community *today*’.<sup>83</sup> Thus too hastily they say that owing to their faith and identity Christians have lagged behind the public in social and political responsibilities as well as in inter-religious dialogue.

The Asian theologian needs to dissect, relive and learn from Barth’s quintessential exploration of the content and form of revelation (the ontological and epistemological foundations of the knowledge of God) discussed in Chapter Three. Barth insists that by His objective revelation in the universal lordship of Jesus Christ and by His subjective revelation in the power of the Holy Spirit, God not only spoke to those who lived there and then but also has spoken to all human beings here and now. How, then, human beings are to receive the Word of God in its threefold form as revealed, written and preached is by the procedure of *fides quaerens intellectum*. It reveals the mystery of the unity of

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<sup>83</sup> Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth*, 30ff.

God's being and act--God's act in His being and *vice versa* because God fulfils what He does in being Father, Son, and Holy Ghost-- and will certainly empower and strengthen His community in time of suffering and uncertainty brought about by political evildoing and religious complexity.

In Chapter Five the present writer points out that the Christian faith, which is made distinct from the general concept of religion by Barth's use of *Aufhebung*, is an ongoing dynamic process, not a static moral norm, of theological thinking led freely by the Holy Spirit *in accordance with the will of the Father*. One need not have the same external form of any other theologian's faith. Faith itself, in the Asian theologian's own favourite words, constitutes three major steps: the transplantation, indigenisation, and contextualisation of the Word of God by the Holy Spirit. That is to say, although the problems that Asian Christians are compelled to face may not be identical with those which Barth confronted, yet *we*, as Asian, African and European Christians, all have been encouraged to face what we must face by the same, the unique and the sole revelation and the grace of God through and in our Lord Jesus Christ. Thinking of dialogue with other religions, for example, what arise immediately are three questions, as John Bowden states, that *all* Christians have to face: Who dialogues? What is the substance of the dialogue? How do we carry on the dialogue?<sup>84</sup> These questions as a whole lead to an all-embracing answer: it is by faith the one who is possessed of the Christian identity will dialogue with people of other religions, and continue it. However, Christians should not call a halt to dialogue between different faiths only but

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<sup>84</sup> John Bowden, 'Dialogue between the Religions?: Questions from Great Britain' in *Hans Küng: New Horizons for Faith and Thought*, ed. Karl-Josef Kuschel and Hermann Häring (London: SCM Press, 1993), 339-345.



must press on to ask some more fundamental questions such as: What is the telos of a dialogue of this kind? Do we not need more than just dialogue with other religions? For on the one hand, it would be totally unrealistic for any religion to anticipate 'converts' from other religions merely through a cursory dialogue; on the other, it would be extravagant to seek for incorporation of *socio-political* agenda through *religious* contact. In either case the factor of 'religion' is more an obstacle than a help.

These essential questions will never be unanswered in Barth because this is exactly what Barth's ecumenical faith-knowledge is concerned about; it is also that to which he ardently advanced his whole life. With him, only by this faith-knowledge can Christians conceive of the God who is the only source of the Christian identity and self-confidence that we must maintain while in dialogue with people of different faiths. Otherwise we are making compromises, rather than having dialogue, with them. Moreover, by the faith-knowledge, the Christian identity, and self-confidence, Barth believes, we are not only to be able to hold dialogue *with other religions* but also *with the secular world*, and, above all, we are able to contribute to them actively and positively.

In fact, Song and some Asian theologians' ignorance of the prepositional aspect of the apostolic faith has left no apparent criteria for them to speak on those issues, such as socio-political reformation and inter-religious dialogue, with any theological meaning to the Asian Christian. On the contrary, Barth maintains, as Eberhard Jüngel has pointed out, that to talk about God *theologically* is above all to take into consideration deliberately the fact that the being of God is prior to the enterprise of human theological questioning and

reasoning.<sup>85</sup> For Barth the knowledge of God (or theology) is not a search for what God is like, but for what God has done *for* human beings by becoming a human being *with* them. Therefore, Asian people's commitment in taking part in the theological debate with a torrent of serious questions, which have been neglected in the West, 'represents a new challenge to theology and may in due course lead to a changed but deeper understanding of our common faith'.<sup>86</sup> Yet it is more important to be 'courageously and humbly' *obedient* to and 'confidently and serenely' *trustful* in the triune God for what had been done in favour of human beings in the act of self-revealing in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. These are the 'two small criteria' that Barth proposes for 'a good theologian' in a personal letter to 'the Christians in South East Asia', dated 19 November 1968.<sup>87</sup> In the light of such a knowledge of God by virtue of God Himself, Barth is convinced, the Asian theologian although standing in the midst of a pluralist society will not be driven by this or that wind of modes or notions. Rather, he or she 'may believe confidently and serenely that God really has not died and will in the right time care for the recognition of His name, His will and His kingdom'.<sup>88</sup> This is actually a *coup de grâce* to the most vulnerable parts of Asian theology--the inadequacy of deducing faith from experience.

Although Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God is tangled in the traditional dichotomy of Western theology between a God who is inconceivable yet who also subsists in a gracious relationship with humankind.<sup>89</sup> Barth does

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<sup>85</sup> Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, xix-xx.

<sup>86</sup> Karl Barth, 'No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth,' trans. William Rader, *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, 11 (Autumn, 1968), 3-4.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 2.

not ignore the importance and necessity of Asian Christians knowing God in their own way in line with their context:

In my long life I have spoken many words. But now they are spoken. Now it is your task to be Christian theologians in your new, different and special situation with heart and head, with mouth and hands.... I can only encourage you: Yes, do that: say that which you have to say as Christians for God's sake, responsibly and concretely with your own words and thoughts, concepts and ways! The more responsibly and concretely, the better, the more Christian! You truly do not need to become 'Europeans, Western men', not to mention 'Barthians', in order to be good Christians and theologians. You may feel free to be South East Asian Christians. Be it! Be it, neither arrogantly nor faint-heartedly with regard to the religions around you and the dominant ideologies and 'realities' in your lands! Be it in all openness for the problems which are so burning in your region, and for your own, special and unique fellow human beings; but be it above all in the freedom which is given and allowed to us and which is...where "the Spirit of the Lord is."<sup>90</sup>

The sort of theologian Barth has been is in tune with what is set forth above; he is from top to toe a contextual theologian. Barth loves life so fervently that he has never ceased to relate theology to concrete life. For him 'theology repeats the big *yes* that God gave the world. God loves the world in which we have to live. We have to say *yes* to the world.'<sup>91</sup> Conversely, as Yung has observed, some of the most celebrated Asian theologians are 'only superficially contextual'<sup>92</sup> insofar as in lieu of in their native languages their books were written in the first place in English. Therefore they are always primarily and world-widely read by scholars rather than locally and contextually by the suffering people who are constantly referred to as the subject-matter that 'concerns' or 'worries' the writers. They are simply 'superficially contextual' because they do not actually participate in their Asian compatriots' suffering

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<sup>90</sup> Barth, 'No Boring Theology!', 4-5.

<sup>91</sup> Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian* (Middlesex: Pelican Books, 1968), 138-139 [italics mine].

<sup>92</sup> Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 'Preface', ix.

within their own countries. Quite the reverse, as professors, they prefer to domicile in luxury residences located in the universities of the United States of America, instead of participating in Asia's suffering.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps for that reason, after he experienced the impact of the war on Christians in Germany and witnessed the Confessional pastors' excitement about the publication of the second volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, John Marsh remarks: '*I have never since been able to give much credence to the critics who from a safe and comfortable Anglo-American study armchair, tell the world that Barth's theology is theoretical and remote.*'<sup>94</sup> 'Theoretical, in one sense,' Marsh goes on, 'of course it must be, if it be theology at all; but remote, no!--not after I had seen how much his writing was a veritable munitions of war in the death struggle of the Church, which was given victory very largely through the writings of Karl Barth.'<sup>95</sup>

Marsh's candid remark is cogently applicable to those superficial theological writings alleged to be contextually Asian. Precisely, as Johnson says, to Barth Christian knowledge of God is always 'in a ceaseless interplay between the "no" and the "yes," between a God who is made known in Jesus Christ but who remains profoundly unknown in the impenetrable depths of mystery.'<sup>96</sup> The negative side and the positive side interweave and interact dialectically. 'Without the appeal to mystery, theology would devolve into nothing more than an ideological support for the biases of one's own community. By the same token, without some positive, Christological content, the appeal to mystery would

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<sup>93</sup> For example, Koyama has been professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York, since the late 1970s, and Song has been professor at Pacific School of Religion since 1985.

<sup>94</sup> John Marsh, Preface to Karl Barth's *Deliverance to the Captives*, trans. Marguerite Wieser (London: SCM Press, 1961), 8 [italics mine].

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 2.

evaporate into the silent pondering of the void.’<sup>97</sup>

Here the cleft between the knowledge of God ‘from above’ in the Western Christian tradition and that in Asian theology ‘from below’ has been bridged. Barth’s knowledge of God is actually a struggle with the difficulties of human life *from below* by virtue of the faith-knowledge bestowed *from above*. This faith-knowledge seeks to understand the triune God who *makes* His being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit known to human beings through the *sanctorum communio* of all times in the sovereign love of Jesus Christ--through His revelation in Christ, testified in Holy Scripture by the prophets and apostles, which transcends the barriers of all time and space. Barth believes: ‘Real knowledge of God...with its ultimate certainties, knows that it is at the beginning if its work, not its end; it has never finished with the riddles and the difficulties of life.’ For him, ‘knowledge of God is not an escape into the safe heights of pure ideas, but an entry into the need of the present world, sharing in its suffering, its activity and its hope.’<sup>98</sup> The revelation of God which has occurred; ‘in Christ is not the communication of a formula about the world, the possession of which enables one to be at rest, but the power of God which sets us in motion, the creation of a new cosmos. A divine shoot breaks through its ungodly casing.’<sup>99</sup>

Apparently, it is by no means a static formula about God, rather it is a dynamic process of revelation, witness, and knowledge: in both God’s objective and subjective revelation, the Christian becomes acquainted with Him and is inspired by faith to bear witness to Him in line with his or her daily life; in so

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<sup>97</sup> Johnson, *The Mystery of God*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 100 quoting Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 1st ed. (Zurich: G. A. Bäschlin, 1919), 264.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

doing the Christian's knowledge of God is also renewed and improved. Such an ongoing and *recurrent* process is irreversible in sequence. This is the belief that was maintained by Barth since the first edition of his commentary *Romans* was published; it is not exaggerative to emphasize that the whole life and theology of Barth are the most *comme il faut* interpretation of that belief.

In addition to what has been argued in favour of Barth throughout the present thesis, one point to be noted is that Barth's doctrine of redemption which was intentionally preserved for the fifth volume of his *Church Dogmatics* was never written. Having composed doctrines of creation and reconciliation in correspondence to the first person and second person of Holy Trinity, viz., God the Father the Creator and the Son the Reconciler, Barth left the posthumous proposal on Pneumatology--the saving work of the third person, *the Holy Spirit as Redeemer*--a *terra incognita* to the reader, in which the universally inclusive salvation would have been more amply revealed.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, since he has made clear in his doctrines of creation and reconciliation that creation is *theatrum gloriae Dei* which offers the external foundation of God's salvational covenant of grace, the internal basis of creation, with human beings,<sup>101</sup> the ecumenical knowledge of God by way of various Asian cultures and non-Christian traditions would not have been precluded by Barth. This is why Barth must encourage and urge Asian Christians to do, in accordance with the dynamic situation in their corner of the world, what is for the most part unknown to him.<sup>102</sup>

Without a doubt, Song is commendable in the sense that he calls with

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord*, esp. 148-189.

<sup>101</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, 42-392, IV/3, 137ff.

<sup>102</sup> Barth, 'No Boring Theology!', 3.

intensity for an incarnational Christianity that not only has a great regard for Asian cultures and religions, but also brings into existence positive socio-political transformation—‘justice, dignity, equality, freedom, respect for human rights, and economic wealth--to the Asians’.<sup>103</sup> A world, to put it briefly, which, while in part gradually being embodied in Western Civilisation in the modern world, was soundly impacted and originally outlined by Christianity.<sup>104</sup> Such a task, in Song’s view, is to be put into practice by each individual Christian’s participation in social reformation in the teeth of foreseeable persecution so that the knowledge of God can be obtained through suffering. He regards this Christian social innovation as evangelisation against traditional understanding. For evangelisation is not a personal spiritual matter; rather is it ‘an act of empowering people with the power to suffer unto hope. It is an act which makes people aware that God does not condone social and political evil, that God does not accept suffering as the inevitable result of fate.’<sup>105</sup> But the essential question as to who empowers whom remains unanswered.

Insofar as Song’s theological presumptions are influenced by the secular and relativist thought that has prevailed in the West since the Enlightenment, he is under the illusion that human beings are able to conceive of God not by, as the ‘traditional’ Christian faith claims, the triune God’s *active* redemption first in the *Heilsgeschichte* and then related to world history through Christian evangelism and pastoral care, but by virtue of intuition, folk tales and sometimes self-confidence that stems from human *ratio* and *empeiria* instead of revelation and biblical narratives. As has been shown, by replacing vast areas of Christian

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<sup>103</sup> Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 176.

<sup>104</sup> Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 176-177.

<sup>105</sup> Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 172.

theology as Western creations with his own theological methods and contents, Song has concurrently discarded the central teachings of Christianity. He has also completely ruled out possibilities for reconsidering aspects of the Christian tradition so as to rediscover the good news of liberation for which Song himself and Asian Christians have been longing. As a consequence, Song's obvious deviationistic vision of Christianity in general and his doctrine of the knowledge of God in particular have done harm than favour to Asian Christians, as they are simply another version of natural theology which varies from the Reformed tradition and the apostolic faith in which he himself stands.

On the contrary, Barth is convinced that the hopeless impotence of humanity can only be made anew in Christ's reconciliation. From his life-long engagement and struggle with the reality of human life, particularly with politics, Barth is aware of the fact that when the real Christian (revealed) knowledge of God, which reveals the celestial relationship of God to the created, is acknowledged and believed in, all the terrestrial relationship will also be properly understood and exercised. Both the conviction and awareness, underlying his doctrine of the knowledge of God and perhaps his entire theology, are the most consequential contribution to all Asian Christians, including theologians and laymen and women. They prove that by maintaining the Christian identity and bearing in mind the twofold attitude of 'exclusivism without triumphalism and inclusivism without compromise' in the earnest and honest rediscovery of the richness of the Christian faith and traditions, Asian Christians will unquestionably be empowered to commit themselves to preservation of culture, participation in socio-political reformation, as well as inter-religious dialogue without jeopardising their 'traditional' faith.



It is always far too easy to pick out the faults and errors in the work of a great mind like Barth rather than to give a clear, full and fair exposition of its value. What makes an Asian Christian theology *authentic* is not merely the ardently verbal concern over the relationship between contextualisation and various socio-political realities in Asia but also, in face of religious pluralism, the Asian churches' (denominations') faithfulness to their own Christian tradition instead of to the domestication of the Gospel within the society and culture.<sup>106</sup> Authentic Asian Christian knowledge of God then comes from Asian Christians' spiritual concern about, and physical involvement in, the context and reality in compliance with the Christian faith and in the light of their tradition, even though they are all propositionally given. In fact, 'the Christian's knowledge of God is both prepositional and personal-relational.'<sup>107</sup> Such concern and involvement take seriously 'the question of the truthfulness of Christian beliefs or dogmas, as opposed to their mere functionality.'<sup>108</sup> In the light of the theological *what* that Barth has offered Anderson's definition of the task of genuine Asian theology is thus highly acceptable. It is 'to articulate the Christian message in terms that are faithful to the biblical revelation, meaningful to their cultural traditions, and informed concerning the secular movements and ideologies which had their origins in the West but have now become more or less indigenous to most of the countries of Asia.'<sup>109</sup> This definition is certainly in tune with Barth's teaching on the faith-knowledge of God--the faith-knowledge that seeks to understand *who* God really is through the biblical revelation with the help of the apostolic

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<sup>106</sup> Wickremesinghe, 'Christianity in the Context of Other faiths', 97-121.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>109</sup> Anderson, 'Introduction' to *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, 8.

and prophetic witnesses. However, the task of Asian theology can and must go beyond that in the wisdom and power of the Spirit. It must also become a practical faith-knowledge that is in search of the way to bear witness to God in the most effective way in Asia, and *how* to share experiences with their spiritual brothers and sisters in the West where Christianity is suffering from rapid declination.

In short, in comparing the contextual knowledge of God in Barth and Song, the present writer strongly believes that so far as Asian Christians are concerned, logically and theologically, the *What* in Barth deserves and must receive preferential attention to the *How* in Song. Nevertheless, they should not confine themselves to it as though it was the ultimate answer with which of all questions rest. They must bear witness to God in the Asian world other areas in the light of the wisdom of the Spirit and their traditional heritage, of which the latter is so repelled by Song, according to the context.

## CONCLUSION

Barth's never-ending battle against natural theology springs from the thorough frustration at his liberal mentors' slavish endorsement of German nationalist policies during the First World War, irrespective of their potential to endanger the Church and to undermine Christian faith. This battle leads him to an uncompromising denouncement of liberalism and Catholicism in particular and all kinds of natural theology in general in conceiving the humanly inconceivable God. Barth has no doubt that human beings are unable to talk about the immanent God by dint of subjective experience or inner feeling or of objective analogy, nor of both *ad seriatum*, without violating God's transcendence. In order to protect God's transcendence from human manipulation, yet at the same time to accentuate God's gracious relationship with human beings, Barth claims that *the* (Christian) knowledge of God is only bestowed on human beings by the revelation of God actualised in the saving work of Jesus Christ and no other. For him Christian knowledge of God is both a privilege and responsibility of *fides quaerens intellectum* in faith, obedience, and witness in the light of the threefold Word of God in response to the reiterant process of the '*Deus dixit*' as the triune God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ rather than the repetition of any certain theology, especially *theologia naturalis*.

For Barth, if there is some general knowledge of God, it is not yet *true* knowledge unless it becomes 'acknowledgement' of God's grace in terms of gratitude and thanksgiving'.<sup>1</sup> The more closely our thought of God is co-ordinated with our experience of God with gratitude and thanksgiving in the fundamental datum of revelation, the more it is impressed upon our

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 218.

understanding that to conceive the Lord is to know Him as the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Human efforts, such as, nature, fallen humanity, religion and language, like the Hegelian pattern, are affirmed, abased (negated), and then reconstituted by grace, revelation and the one Word to be witnesses to Jesus Christ as the only *media* of the knowledge of God *per se*. This general potential for the knowledge of God has represented a decisively new (or different, rightly speaking) situation from Barth's predecessors and contemporaries.

In Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God Jesus Christ thus is from beginning to end the centre of the free-standing *faith-knowledge* of God, and there is no truth as mediated or as encountered which does not originally and ultimately centre in Him. He is the Mediator of the knowledge of God *with us* and the knowledge of us *with God*. The category of the universal lordship of Jesus Christ, for Barth, is an expression of the human *capacity* for knowledge of God, of the *possibility* of knowledge of God which is grounded in the being of God. One cannot understand or expand Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God, which is a synonym for theology, simply by combining the two Greek words *logos* and *theos* as *o logos tou theou* or *o theos tou logos*. Rather, its meaning is much deeper than those two combinations and must be understood as *o logos tou Theou dia o Theou tou logos*, the knowledge of God through the God of knowledge, attested in the Gospel. It is through and through a *faith-knowledge*, because it, emanating from faith, does not manipulate, but is determined by its object and accords with it, by which the knowledge of God designates the 'whole self's growth into understanding of the three-fold God who saves.'<sup>2</sup> Such

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<sup>2</sup> R. D. Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God' in *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes, 193.

knowledge of God in search of the God of the Gospel in its nature is neither 'Liberal' nor 'Catholic', but *evangelical* (ecumenical).

This thesis has demonstrated that in his doctrine of the knowledge of God Barth never made any *material* revision; he never resorted to anything else apart from Jesus Christ. Barth's earlier emphasis on the sovereignty of Christ over the created world in time of battling against the Nazis and the German-Christians has later shifted to His grace and love for the creation in reconciliation. In other words, although different emphases are imposed on the different attributes of Jesus Christ according to the context Barth's knowledge of God is centred at the *identical* universal Lord from first to last. Accordingly, either impugning Barth for denying God's capacity for making Himself known by virtue of nature, or averring that Barth in the end softens his earlier rejective attitude to natural theology, or accusing Barth's theology of taking too little consideration of human reality and thus being acontextual, are equally inadequate. They neglect the fact: Barth has no doubt that in reconciliation Christ restores the broken covenant, on account of which God has made Himself known to human beings without resting on any kind of natural knowledge. In Barth's Contextual *Christocentric* knowledge of God, not only God's supreme sovereignty (the divinity of Christ) but also His providence over nature (the authenticity of the creature) are equally safeguarded. In short, Barth's is a knowledge of God *sub specie Christi*.

Song identifies theology with his own version of anthropology, in order to relate theology closely to human life, in the hope that the problems of suffering and religious pluralism that confront Asian Christians can be solved without reference to western Christian traditions. However, the criticisms of his theology have shown that he in fact creates more problems than aids to Asian

Christians. Unfortunately, for example, instead of helping Taiwanese Christians in resolving the aforementioned problems, their faith and identity are put under threat, and become more vulnerable than ever before. It has been pointed out that what gives rise to those unexpected fatal side effects of Song's theology is the lack of a constant basis and the lack of a precise goal. In Barth, the former is biblical revelation, and the latter is bearing witness to the revelation.

Therefore, Barth's critique of Schleiermacher's subjectivist, and of the Thomist objectivist knowledge of God, and of natural theology altogether, is also applicable to the theology of Song, in which the significant characters that Christ and the Holy Spirit play for Barth in the knowledge of God are trivialised *in toto*. For Song presumes that by virtue of *contextual* suffering experience, concurring with God's incarnation and Jesus' crucifixion, human beings are capable of encountering a compassionate, not an autocratic all-powerful, God and with whose help they will be empowered to transform the unjust society into a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religious, and discrimination- and oppression-free Utopia. His transpositional theology, story theology, third-eye theology, *analogia passionis*, and his concept of the religion of humanity are representative theories. These thoughts urge Asian Christians to participate in social reformation and religious dialogue at full stretch in defiance of the content of the Christ-centred salvation history and Christian mission. The former is the centre and resource of the Christian faith and identity, and the latter is the overruling task of Christians handed down by the Lord through the apostles. Consequently, urgent as they are, their clarion calls for political reformation and

inter-religious dialogue in Asia become ‘a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal’<sup>3</sup> and thus are theologically meaningless to the Asian Christian.

It is important to heed that Barth never despised the roles of culture and context and other religions in the knowledge of God as the Asian theologian so often accuses him. Rather, ‘Barth’s theology was always *Zeitgemäß*; that is, it was always directed to a particular situation and really had no intention of being “timeless”.’<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, in his whole life Barth was so fervently involved in the so-called *reality*, which is *de facto* politically hierarchized, that he had to proclaim: the only genuine knowledge of God for human beings must be *Christocentric*. It derives exclusively from God’s self-revealing *act* of His own *being* revealed primarily in the saving sovereignty and ultimately in the gracious love of Jesus Christ over any ambiguous knowledge offered by human reason, feeling, and speculation. In so doing, Barth has given an immeasurably valuable and convincing sign that not only Taiwanese Christians but all Asian Christians too can partake in socio-political reformation and religious dialogue without going astray or even jettisoning their traditions.

Barth would call for the attention of Song and those who are too scornful of their Christian identity and faith, by rephrasing Jesus’ words (*Luke* 17: 20-21) to the truth: Under no circumstances is the knowledge of God ‘coming with things that can be observed’ by human reason or experience; nor can we say, “‘Look, here it is!’” or “‘There it is!’” For, in fact, the knowledge of God is in the reflection and reforging of the Christian faith, identity and traditions. It is

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<sup>3</sup> *1 Corinthians* 13: 1.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths*, 3rd ed. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 21-25 cited by McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 26-27.

on this basis that this thesis concludes that those who unfortunately aver that 'Barth is no contextual theologian'<sup>5</sup> need to review Barth's contextual knowledge of God and relive his life at full length before coming to a conclusion.

The present writer believes that by answering in the affirmative to *What* Barth's contextual doctrine of the knowledge of God has to say, Asian Christians will be able to keep hold of the exuberance of the Christian faith and identity. In turn, the exuberance will become the answer to the frequently asked question of *How* to bear witness to God effectively and meaningfully not only to their own societies and cultures, but also to the rest of the world. Only when the *what* is genuinely and deeply reflected can the *how* be adequately and sufficiently accomplished. In other words, it will become the basis and resource for sober and selfless participation in social transformation and inter-religious dialogue in various parts of Asia, and for the sharing of these Asian experiences with their spiritual siblings around the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Sauter, 'Shifts in Barth's Thought: The Current Debate between Right- and Left-Wing Barthians' in *Eschatological Rationality: Theological Issues in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 119.



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